

# CATALYST

FUTURE OF CANADA CENTRE

## *Voices of Indigenous youth leaders on reconciliation*

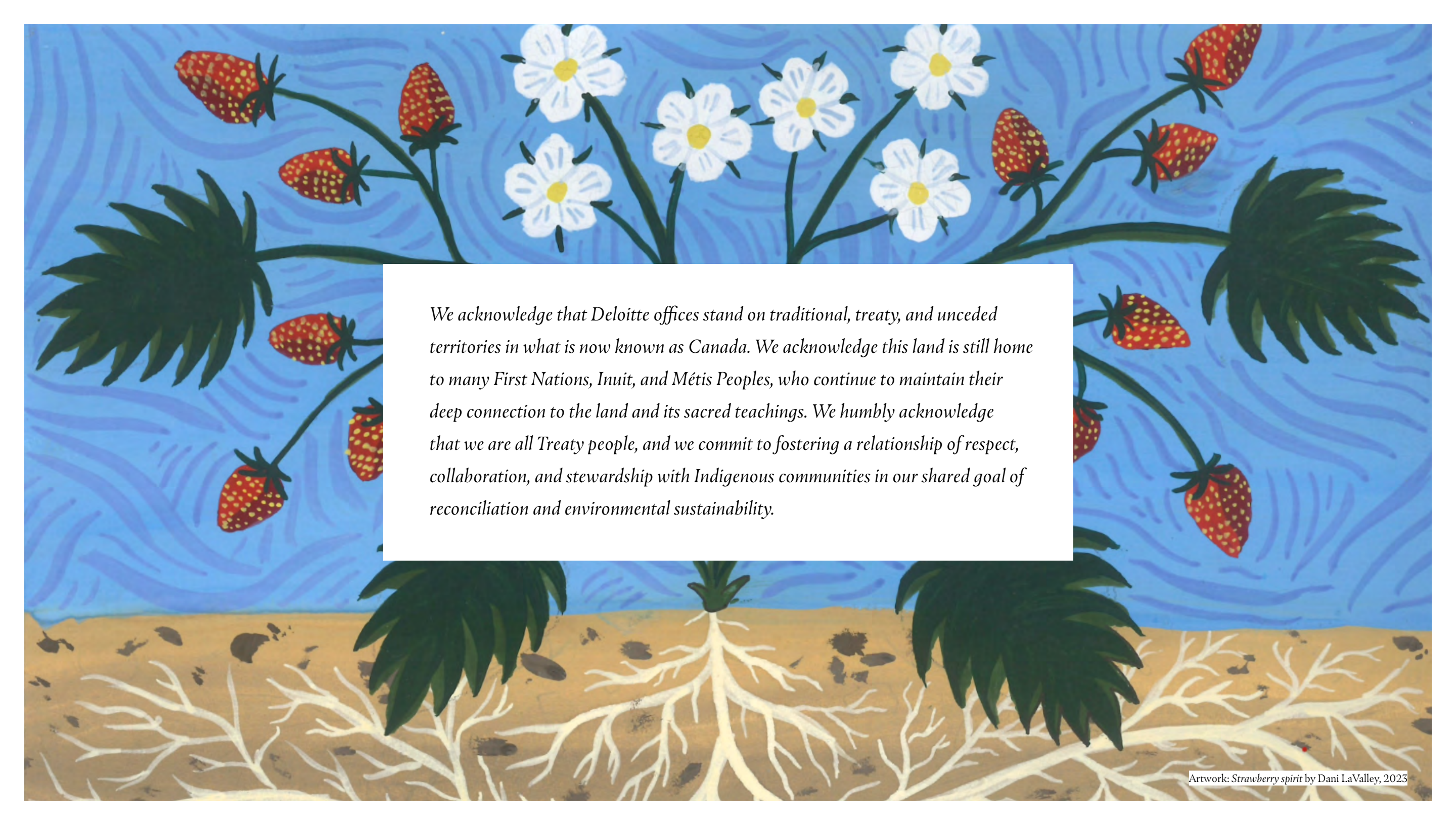
**VOLUME 5: HONOURING INDIGENOUS SOVEREIGNTY  
TOWARD A FUTURE OF COLLECTIVE PROSPERITY**

**Deloitte.**



Artwork: *Otipemisiwak (The people who own themselves)* by Dani LaValley, 2024





*We acknowledge that Deloitte offices stand on traditional, treaty, and unceded territories in what is now known as Canada. We acknowledge this land is still home to many First Nations, Inuit, and Métis Peoples, who continue to maintain their deep connection to the land and its sacred teachings. We humbly acknowledge that we are all Treaty people, and we commit to fostering a relationship of respect, collaboration, and stewardship with Indigenous communities in our shared goal of reconciliation and environmental sustainability.*

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This is the fifth volume of the *Voices of Indigenous youth leaders on reconciliation* series, which acts on Deloitte's commitment to ignite meaningful dialogue on the four themes identified by Indigenous youth as priorities for advancing reconciliation. The series is a joint initiative between Deloitte's Future of Canada Centre and Indigenous Youth Roots, formerly known as Canadian Roots Exchange.



## INTRODUCTION

**P**rior to the arrival of European colonists in what is now referred as North America, Indigenous Peoples were organized as sovereign nations, with their own cultures, economies, governments, and laws. They occupied defined territories, over which they exercised authority as evidenced by peace-making treaties and granting of access to other nations.<sup>1</sup> Over time, settler colonialism and often violent impositions of Euro-western governing systems and cultural values eroded the authority of Indigenous nations, disrupting their sovereignty and cultural foundations to live their lives in accordance with their inherent laws.

Today, First Nations, Métis and Inuit nations continue on this journey of asserting their sovereignty, advocating for recognition and wellness of their communities. In this era of rebuilding, Indigenous youth are taking up the call to advocate for their futures, leading the way for the next generation of leaders.

When asked where sovereignty shows up in their lives and the barriers that they and their communities face in exercising sovereignty, the Indigenous youth we spoke with cited the following challenges:

- ♦ being able to exercise self- and cultural expression and experiencing belonging
- ♦ having a say over what happens to their land
- ♦ organizing as collectives in response to community needs
- ♦ working with and within non-Indigenous systems
- ♦ other people's attitudes and mindsets regarding sovereignty



Photo by Damien Bouchard

→ The youth's responses demonstrate that the dominant dialogue around sovereignty, focusing largely on the legal and political perspective, is limiting and excludes the important elements of their lived experience. This final volume of our *Voices of Indigenous youth leaders on reconciliation series* examines Indigenous youth experiences with the concept of sovereignty, as it is more broadly defined by them. We also illuminate Indigenous youth leaders' insights on First Nations, Métis and Inuit nations in exercising decision-making on matters concerning their territories and relations.

Recommendations from the youth are directed to policymakers, corporate Canada, the legal profession, cultural and heritage institutions, and the general public. As we heard from the youth, effecting Indigenous sovereignty is a collective responsibility and will benefit all involved.

Ushering in a shift in dialogue that affirms Indigenous sovereignty has the potential to draw a number of benefits for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous Peoples alike. Restoring integrity in nation-to-nation relations and agency of Indigenous nations to govern in ways that are culturally responsive to their community members' needs and aspirations to carve a path toward healing and collective prosperity is just the beginning.

Indigenous Peoples and allies are ready for change, which is long overdue when one considers the efforts made to date in healing and rebuilding Indigenous nations in Canada. We all must do better to open up pathways for realizing Indigenous sovereignty, while respecting Indigenous nations' visions for their collective futures.

Now is the time to take up this effort for our future's sake.

*We at Deloitte believe we have both a call to service and a duty to drive positive change for Canada. Through our collaboration with young Indigenous leaders on this report, we aim to support Canada's leaders in bringing more inclusive approaches to the nation's pressing issues and building a path towards a future of collective prosperity.*

## ***Our approach***

This exploratory research design applies an Indigenous youth-centred, two-eyed seeing approach, which seeks to balance both Indigenous and Western research methods and perspectives. We collected and analyzed data in keeping with international CARE\* principles,<sup>2</sup> including respecting the youth co-researchers' data and knowledge. We protected their data through responsible retention protocols and obtained their prior consent on how their data would be shared in the report. Given our focus on amplifying First Nations, Métis and Inuit youth voices, we used an inductive approach of inquiry to identify key themes, for they are experts in their own lived experiences.

We synthesized insights shared by the participants of the 2023 and 2024 *Indigenous Youth Advocacy Week* (IYAW) programs, as well as the 2023/24 *Indigenous Youth Policy School* (IYPS), delivered by Indigenous Youth Roots (IYR). The youth informed the report's overall insights and provided their recommendations, as reflected throughout, on ways to support the advancement of Indigenous sovereignty.

Applying Kirkness & Barndhardt's principles for working effectively with Indigenous Peoples, our report blends their four 'R's: Respect, Relevance, Reciprocity, and Responsibility with our conceptual framework to present the youth's insights and identify opportunities to advance progress on Indigenous sovereignty in Canada.<sup>3</sup>

## ***Methodology***

We began by surveying Indigenous youth aged 18 to 29 who participated in the 2022 Indigenous Youth Advocacy Week. We then held follow-up interviews and a workshop with four 2022 IYAW participants, then organized another workshop with the 2023 and 2024 IYAW cohorts to dig deeper into the challenges they faced and discussed possible solutions. Finally, we facilitated a workshop, held a report briefing session and underwent a review process with the 2023/24 IYPS youth participants.

We supplemented the youth's insights and recommendations with secondary sources, including academic publications, analyses of aggregated data sets from Statistics Canada and other sources, and interviews with both academic and public sector specialists experienced in working with Indigenous Peoples, Knowledge Keepers, and governments on self-governance, nation-building, treaty relations and implementation, and other sovereignty-affirming work.

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\* CARE refers to collective benefit, authority to control, responsibility, and ethics.

“

*Sovereignty, for me, is a useful term in contesting the claims of the sovereign state over us. The idea that we are a rights-bearing collective, that our existence, autonomy, and independence should be respected—in English, sovereignty is the closest thing.”*

– Taiaiake Alfred, PhD,  
Kaniēn'kehá:ka, Kahnawà:ke

### ***An inclusive definition of Indigenous sovereignty***

What do the youth mean when talking about sovereignty?

At the outset, the Indigenous youth and scholars we spoke with cautioned that a Westphalian understanding of sovereignty is not the appropriate starting point when discussing how we can heal relations between Indigenous nations and settler state governments, given the diverging views of what sovereignty means and how it should be expressed. While Westphalian sovereignty refers to a state's supreme or exclusive right to exercise political authority over a defined territory, Indigenous sovereignty refers to an inclusive form of self-determination that recognizes the interdependency between different political collectives and relationships to the land.<sup>4</sup>

Despite such diverging concepts of sovereignty, the youth and scholars acknowledge that for the purposes of moving the dialogue forward, centering Indigenous worldviews when conceptualizing sovereignty is a necessary starting point.

Indigenous Peoples are diverse and therefore have a diverse array of perspectives of and approaches to sovereignty. We asked the youth what Indigenous sovereignty means to them, mindful that its definition is not universal. In their view, sovereignty is not merely a legal or political concept relating to control as commonly understood in western views but is fundamentally about relationships.



Collectively, the youth define Indigenous sovereignty as...

**...taking responsibility for their relations to the land, to animate and inanimate beings, and to each other. Sovereignty involves having freedom to self-express and live one's cultural identity without encroachment, with the necessary resources and spaces to do so. Finally, sovereignty means an ability to set and have those boundaries respected. This ability manifests in having authority on what happens on their traditional lands, to their community, to their relatives (human and non-human), and to oneself.**

***"To me, sovereignty means the freedom to live by my own values, to nurture my own relationships and the respect that comes with being my own entity, without being under the thumb of a society that has shown time and time again that they don't care about me. I think it also means forging respectful and reciprocal relationships between governance, non-human kin, the land, and others."***

At its core, the Indigenous youth we spoke with understand sovereignty in action as exercising free will and fulfilling one's personal responsibilities as handed down by the Creator (varying among Indigenous Peoples and Nations), affirmed and maintained by connecting with the land in which they originate. Indigenous experts describe this individual sovereignty as coming from the laws and responsibilities set out in natural law, in the cultural customs of one's ancestral connections, which hold teachings on how to live a good life in accordance with those principles.<sup>5</sup> These principles underscore the importance of respecting connections with both the spiritual and natural world, with land being a necessary component for living one's life in a good way.<sup>6</sup>

“

*Indigenous sovereignty in the simplest way is the ability for me to live my life according to my original instructions that the Creator gave, which is inclusive of laws, practices, traditions on the lands and territories that I have been born into through the nation that I come from, without any external interference from governments...”*

– Janice Makokis, M.A., LL.B.,  
Nehiyaw Iskwew, Onihcikiskwapiwin  
(Saddle Lake Cree Nation), Treaty No. 6,  
Assistant Professor, Faculty of Law, University of Windsor

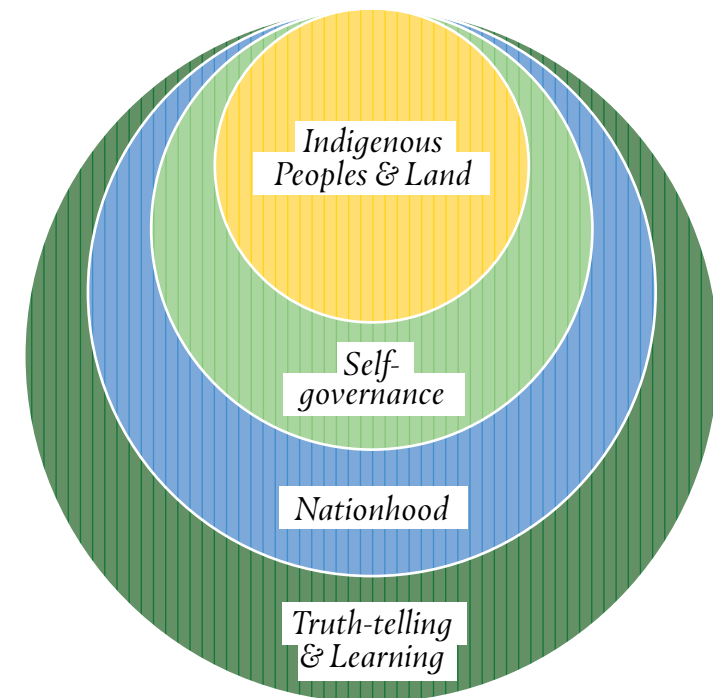


## ***Components for advancing Indigenous sovereignty***

The circles represent different areas where the work of asserting sovereignty takes place. Indigenous Peoples and the land—from where inherent sovereignty is sourced—are placed at the centre, with this sphere encompassing challenges that impinge on self-sovereignty and on Indigenous Peoples’ ability to care for and maintain connections with the land. The second sphere expands to include Indigenous Peoples’ experiences in asserting sovereignty when organizing as a collective, while the third sphere captures challenges at the nation-to-nation level (in relations with the Canadian nation state and with other Indigenous nations) and when working with non-Indigenous entities (e.g., corporations). The fourth speaks to the challenges Indigenous Peoples live by virtue of existing within a Canadian nation state and in relation to Canadians broadly, including settler apathy, misconceptions, and persistent colonial attitudes.

The framework identifies relationships as the space where the work of advancing sovereignty is done—in individual relations to land, in relationships within communities, between and among nations, and with the Canadian public. Concentric circles are used to capture the sense in which these components are interconnected and held together by relationships that span across each of the spheres, suggesting that the work done in one is never independent from work done in others. By design, the framework reflects the concepts of interconnectedness and circles of kinship common to Indigenous understandings of social organization.<sup>7</sup>

*The Indigenous youth’s insights identify four priority areas for action in advancing Indigenous sovereignty, as visualized by the conceptual framework depicted below:*



## ***A vision of Indigenous sovereignty realized***

When asked what they hope the future would look like if Indigenous sovereignty were to be fully realized and respected, they envision the following as key experiences:

- ♦ Indigenous Peoples live in a society where they feel comfortable in their identity, able to self-express and actualize their full potential,
- ♦ Indigenous nations are exercising effective governance and authority to meet community needs, resulting in their people healing and thriving,
- ♦ Sustainable Indigenous-led decision-making and land practices are in place and respected by governments and landowners in a cooperative, collaborative way, and
- ♦ Indigenous nations are interacting with governments on an equal nation-to-nation basis with influence on outcomes.

Reconciliation involves working towards achieving each of these visions for Indigenous sovereignty. For the youth, true reconciliation is looking around and seeing relevant Indigenous values reflected around them in a world that welcomes their authentic identities. The youth hope for environments that are healthier and embrace more art and self-expression; for societies in which Indigenous Peoples can live according to their cultural principles; and for a daily sense that they are cared for in the form of governance that reflects their needs and interests, and equitable access to infrastructure and opportunities.

At the current moment, the necessary conditions for realizing this vision are not in place. How do we get there?

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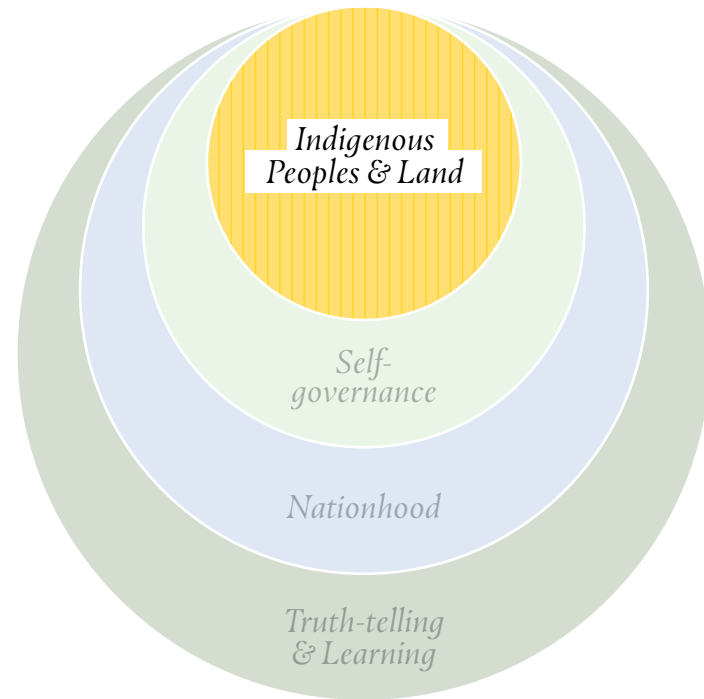
*It's a freedom of doing whatever we want in the way that makes things right in our territory, whether that be with our Elders, our people, our land, but also with spiritual beings on Mother Earth and to have the freedom to walk in a way without any colonial barriers.”*



*1. Respect Indigenous Peoples' sovereignty and relationships with the land*



## INSIGHTS



With the natural world being the space for fulfilling sovereignty, Indigenous Peoples have been using and protecting their lands since time immemorial. This connection to land is described by Indigenous knowledge stewards as sacred. Absent of colonial influence or suppression, this inherent responsibility is passed down in teachings to the next generations to honour fundamental connections and responsibilities to community and the land.

The ways in which Indigenous self-sovereignty is expressed for many are through practicing inherited ceremony and cultural traditions on their ancestral lands and passing down these traditions, embedding pride in identity and fulfilling one's sacred responsibilities. However, through residential schools and later child welfare apprehensions during the Sixties and Millennium Scoops, the objective of what is now referred to as Canada was to stop the transmission of Indigenous communities' languages, cultures, and values, and strip away Indigenous children's identities.<sup>8</sup> This disruption, which occurred over several generations, left many Indigenous Peoples searching for reconnection of their identity within themselves, their community, and their ancestral lands to live a good and fulfilling life.\*

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\* To learn more about colonization's impacts on Indigenous Peoples' mental wellness, see our previous [\*Volume 3: Breaking colonial legacies and mapping new pathways to mental wellness\*](#)



## INSIGHTS

When asked by IYR in its survey about what makes them feel empowered, Indigenous youth most frequently said (78%) when they could be themselves and respected for who they are.<sup>9</sup> Indigenous youth we spoke with also noted fundamental barriers to being able to express their individual sovereignty and identity to actualize their full potential. For one, having to navigate both worlds- between their Indigenous community, and western, non-Indigenous settings can be an emotionally taxing experience, having to continuously code-switch in their workplaces, schools, and other public settings. This experience places one in a continuous state of cultural tension, from feeling that they have to shed part of their identity.<sup>\*10</sup> This emotional survival instinct is considered necessary to protect oneself from ongoing racism and continued lack of cultural inclusion in interactive spaces that still exists, signaling to Indigenous Peoples that in order to advance in non-Indigenous spaces, one must hide their identity, thereby discouraging one from pursuing success and enjoyment in those spaces.

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<sup>\*</sup> To learn more about fostering inclusive workplaces, see our previous [Volume 2: Bridging study and work for long-term success](#).

<sup>†</sup> To learn more about colonial impacts on Indigenous cultures and knowledge systems, see our previous [Volume 4: Reconciling our relationships to preserve mother earth for future generations](#).

Having connection and access to ancestral lands are essential for many Indigenous Peoples in fulfilling their personal responsibilities and living a holistically fulfilling life. The Indigenous youth we spoke with shared that they often have trouble finding learning opportunities on cultural land practices, due to lack of proximity and access to land to gather and hunt on, for example. Speaking to the inextricable nature of many Indigenous Peoples' connections to land, an Indigenous specialist noted that 'one cannot exercise sovereignty without land.'<sup>†</sup>

“

*It feels as though you have to present yourself as the most neutral version and I don't enjoy that. I have a cultural and community history, so why do I have to set that aside just to exist?"*

## **Myth: “Land back is about taking away private property and kicking settlers off traditional Indigenous lands”**

The youth are mindful of the fears attached to the concept of land back, that it is viewed as a threat to settler peoples’ ability to live on the lands that they now call home. On the contrary, the youth and Indigenous specialists emphasize the historical caretaking role that Indigenous Peoples’ have been entrusted with, and the need for a say in what happens to their ancestral lands to fulfill those responsibilities to honour the land. Land back is a call to revisit traditional Western worldviews on land ownership, reclaiming Indigenous understandings of consent and to re-center Indigenous natural laws in how we treat the land.<sup>11</sup>

- *Land back is about respecting Indigenous sovereignty and self-determination over lands that they had originally inhabited that were taken from them.*
- *Land back is about sharing decision-making power and having a say over what happens to their ancestral lands.*
- *Land back is about Indigenous and non-Indigenous Peoples forging respectful and reciprocal relationships with the land.*



## RECOMMENDATIONS

### 1. Recognize and affirm Indigenous sovereignty

**Governments and business leaders** would help eliminate barriers to Indigenous Peoples' expressing their identities and foster constructive working relationships by co-developing reconciliation statements that extend beyond land acknowledgments to both advance reconciliation and affirm Indigenous sovereignty. This work can involve developing reconciliation action strategies to implement relevant Truth and Reconciliation Commission Calls to Action and the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) articles and to establish relationship protocols with relevant Indigenous nation(s) including urban Indigenous collective organizations.

Canada's UNDRIP Action Plan includes 181 measures for implementing the federal UNDRIP Act. To date, among provinces and territories, only British Columbia, Québec and the Northwest Territories have committed to implement UNDRIP.



#### **Recognition of Indigenous sovereignty in action:**

- ♦ *City of Edmonton Indigenous Framework*

*The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples affirms:*

**Article 5** – *Indigenous peoples have the right to maintain and strengthen their distinct political, legal, economic, social and cultural institutions, while retaining their right to participate fully, if they so choose, in the political, economic, social and cultural life of the State.*

**Article 18** – *Indigenous peoples have the right to participate in decision-making in matters which would affect their rights, through representatives chosen by themselves in accordance with their own procedures, as well as to maintain and develop their own Indigenous decision-making institutions.*

## 2. Cultivate environments that welcome Indigenous identities and harness potential

**Governments, businesses, and other organizations** can play an important role in making space for Indigenous-led inclusion initiatives that foster community-building, cross-cultural learning, and spaces for Indigenous leadership to grow. These actions may include establishing social enterprises for Indigenous Peoples to develop their skills and respective entrepreneurial goals, while offering opportunities for community-based learning and gathering opportunities.



### ***Cultivation in action:***

- ♦ *Adaawe Indigenous Business Hub (Ottawa)*

## 3. Return land decision-making to Indigenous nations and share the land

**Governments, businesses, landowners** can honour Indigenous sovereignty concerning land by forming reciprocal relations with territorial Indigenous rightsholders in the respective area. Collaborative options include land co-management protocols developed with Indigenous rightsholders, and land sharing or access arrangements with land tenure holders. If such land decision-making arrangements are not tenable, resource revenue sharing may be an option for parties as mutual compromise.



# Case study: Establishing the Treaty Land Sharing Network (TLSN) to facilitate safe land access

The TLSN is a group of farmers, ranchers, and other landholders in Saskatchewan (and Alberta) who came together to begin the crucial work of honouring the Treaties governing their lands and implementing treaty relationships through ongoing engagement and learning. Recognizing their roles and responsibilities as Treaty people, members of the Network welcome First Nations and Métis Peoples to gather plants and medicines, hunt, and practice ceremony on the land they farm, ensuring safe and secure access for Indigenous land users.

## **Background**

In 2016, Colten Boushie, a young First Nations man, was shot and killed by a farmer on his privately-owned land, after Colten sought help with a flat tire. The farmer was acquitted of charges, sparking concerns about racism in the legal system. In 2019, a group of landholders saw the need to better understand their responsibilities as Treaty people and first gathered together at Wanuskewin and then again with Indigenous land users in Fort Qu'Appelle, to discuss and deepen their understanding of Treaties

as frameworks for coexistence. The knowledge and ideas shared at these gatherings formed the backbone of the organization.

The organizing committee planned, spoke to settlers, applied for grants, and formed strategic partnerships to strengthen the network. In the summer of 2020, TLSN held a ceremony organized by one of the key treaty partners and led by a local Elder, marking the organization's start and demonstrating the landholders' commitment to restoring the treaty relationship.

## **Outcomes**

Since its inception, the network has grown to 52 locations and 37,000 acres across Treaty 4 and Treaty 6 in Saskatchewan, including acreage in central Alberta.

The intentional sharing of land through the network has not only made it safer for local Indigenous Peoples to practice their ways of life but created an opportunity for settlers to build respectful and positive relationships based on treaty principles with local

Indigenous groups. The network has also facilitated ongoing cultural exchange and learning through ceremonies involving settlers, like powwows, land-based learning events for schools and gatherings that bring together farmers and landowners, neighbours, and Indigenous community members.

## **Best Practices**

- ♦ Honouring and implementing **original Treaty commitments** as Treaty people
- ♦ Demonstrating **responsibility** and **accountability** through individual action
- ♦ **Community-engaged** and **Indigenous-informed** development process
- ♦ Cultural sensitivity and **respect for protocol** and ceremony
- ♦ Commitment to **ongoing learning** and **relationship-building**

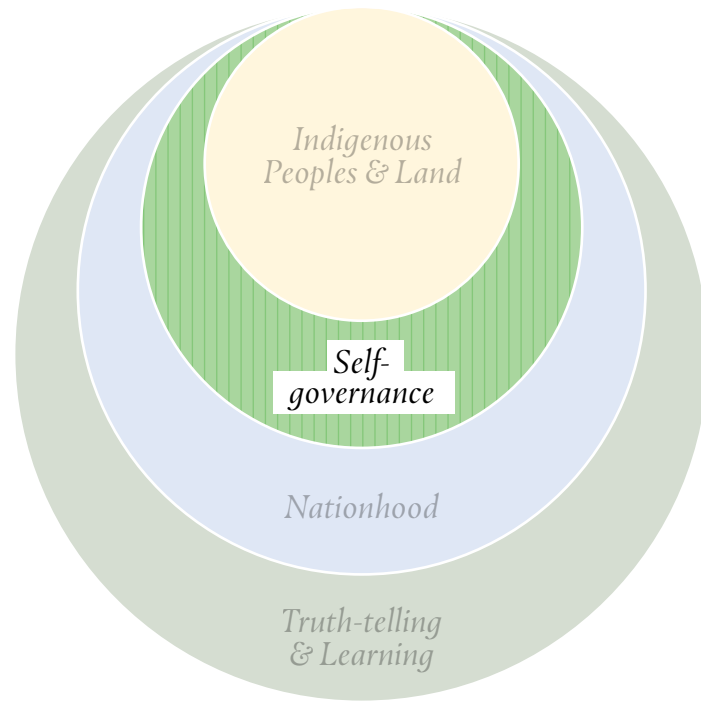


## 2. Facilitate community relevant self-governance





## INSIGHTS



According to the youth, the ability to organize as collectives and self-govern is paramount to sovereignty. For thousands of years, Indigenous Peoples in what is now known as Canada were organized as sovereign nations with governing jurisdiction over their territories and exercised such caretaking responsibilities.

Many Indigenous collectives have always been organized around the wisdom and philosophies, values and customs of their members who recognize that culture is the law, and conversely, that law is culture. In this way, as one specialist we interviewed described, each community's approach to governance is highly cultural and localized with unique traditions, resulting in a broad diversity of governing structures and practices.

However, Indigenous governments and their organizing values, customs—like ceremonies—and spiritual underpinnings have historically been condemned. The racist attitude and infantilizing view of Indigenous ways of life and organizing as inferior are deeply imbedded within the Canadian government's laws that remain in effect today. Most notable is the *Indian Act*, which was introduced in 1876 with the intention of establishing control over and assimilating Indigenous Peoples.



*Indigenous Peoples have had relationships with their lands since time immemorial, and their systems of law and governance come from those lands. For non-Indigenous people living within Indigenous lands, we need to learn about and understand the Indigenous laws and governance of the lands where we live and figure out how to fit within these and not interfere with them...*

– Elizabeth Carlson-Manathra, PhD, Associate Professor, Laurentian University



## **Myth: “Indigenous law is overly spiritual, mythical or supernatural”**

The youth point out a tendency to caricature Indigenous approaches to governance and law as overly spiritual, superstitious, or even supernatural. This excessive scrutiny often ignores the ways Canada’s laws and institutions have been deeply influenced by Christian teachings and traditions that have shaped many of our ideas of equity and human rights. In the same way that the “Good Samaritan” laws make reference to a Christian parable, some Indigenous laws can be sourced from creation stories or songs, ceremonies and customs that are spiritual in nature.

- *All legal and governance systems are influenced by culture and reflect the prevailing values and principles of the populations they govern.*
- *Because values remain deeply embedded in our laws and policies it is essential that we examine and update outdated ones.*

### ***A history of colonial imposition over traditional forms of Indigenous governance***

The *Indian Act*, which disrupted traditional systems and replaced them with band councils, continues to be a structural barrier to self-governance, severely limiting decision-making authority and jurisdiction, and restricting control over finances and reserve lands. As a result, many communities currently find themselves functioning within a system designed to advance the interests of the settler state, impose political control and suppress their cultures and traditions.<sup>12</sup>

While Canada was less explicit in its claims of jurisdiction over Inuit, Métis and other “non-status Indians” not included under the *Indian Act*, these groups have also been treated as wards of the state with authority being exercised irregularly and public services being managed in a neglectful way. Failing to recognize their self-government, the settler

state instead enacted colonial policies as they saw fit, advantageously relocating some of these groups and claiming land rights through the Inuit relocation program and Métis scrip system, for example.\* In 2013, the Supreme Court of Canada also found that the Crown failed to act honourably in carrying out land grants promised under the agreed upon *Manitoba Act* of 1870, when it stripped generations of Métis from a stable land base and governance on their homelands.<sup>15</sup>

### ***The promise held in resurgence of self-governance***

Indigenous youth envision their communities to be self-determining, rooted in their traditional teachings and systems of governance, with quality infrastructure and services.<sup>14</sup> Both Indigenous youth and specialists underscore the importance of moving away from forms of imposed political control and towards independent and culturally relevant self-governance. Addressing these

structural barriers and lingering prejudices towards Indigenous ways of governing is not only essential to the exercise of sovereignty, but a matter of cultural survival and critical to community wellbeing.

***“Sovereignty is not something new. Our ancestors knew how to run things and how governance worked. We don’t have to use laws and ideas [from the Indian Act] and we shouldn’t have to mirror Canadian governments.”***

In fact, research continues to demonstrate that Indigenous collectives that have greater control over their affairs and engage in culturally relevant institution-building, experience: stronger economic outcomes;<sup>15</sup> improved holistic health outcomes and access to care;<sup>16</sup> social services that improve wellbeing of children and families;<sup>17</sup> and higher levels of interpersonal and political trust reported by community members.<sup>18</sup>

Ultimately, however, the youth emphasize that the choice of how to govern should be for each community to make. As they put it: “every nation is at a different place with different needs and at different stages of healing,” and governance will not look the same for every nation. They recognize that there is no one right way to organize and call on institutional partners to honour the rich diversity of governing structures and practices that emerge as communities reclaim and modernize these systems.

***“It’s important to be able to modernize governing systems for communities who want to step into these areas. Our communities are open to new ideas, especially to preserve cultural traditions and preserve our lands.”***

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\* To learn more about Canada’s history of suppression of Métis and Inuit Nations governance, see Appendix.

### *Indigenous-led and culturally relevant governance drives positive outcomes for Indigenous communities:*

- ♦ **Economic:** *According to the 2016 Census, comprehensive land claims agreements increased community-level average household incomes by over \$10,000, while self-government and opt-in arrangements related to land management reduced the Gini coefficient for income inequality by 2-3.5 percentage points.<sup>19</sup>*
- ♦ **Health:** *Since the introduction of the Inuit midwives practice in Nunavik, which integrates traditional knowledge, the proportion of women who travel to Montreal to give birth has dropped to being only 8%—previously it was standard practice for Inuit (and First Nations) women living in remote northern regions.<sup>20</sup>*
- ♦ **Education:** *When allied Mi'kmaq First Nations collectively first took control of their education system in 1998 under the Mi'kmaw Education Act, only 30% of their students were graduating from secondary school. Mi'kmaw Kina'matnewey, the Mi'kmaq education authority, reported a graduation rate of 84% in 2022-23.<sup>21</sup>*
- ♦ **Family services:** *In its 2022-23 annual report, Métis Child, Family and Community Services reported a 65% reduction in apprehensions of Métis children in Manitoba over its past 6 years through its Family Services program.<sup>22</sup>*

The work of restoring self-government has been taking place over the course of many years, only after hundreds of years of tension and tireless advocacy by Indigenous nations to secure recognition of their sovereignty. In Canada, there are currently 25 self-government agreements involving 43 communities, 50 ongoing self-government negotiations, and 2 education agreements involving 35 communities.<sup>23</sup> These agreements and modern treaties come in different forms, including comprehensive land claim

agreements with self-government, stand-alone self-government agreements, and sectoral self-government agreements (jurisdiction over specific subject matter such as education, health or child and family services). Beyond federal and provincial frameworks, many Indigenous collectives are also asserting their jurisdiction, rebuilding their governance institutions, and charting autonomous paths towards sovereignty, independent of formal recognition from the Canadian government.

Pathways to establishing governance structures that better reflect a community's social, political aspirations can improve socioeconomic conditions.<sup>24</sup> For example, an analysis of 2016 Census data using Indigenous Services Canada's Wellbeing Index showed that these self-government agreements increase community wellbeing by 4 points for Indigenous residents and 5 points for all residents due to positive impacts on housing, income and employment.<sup>25</sup>

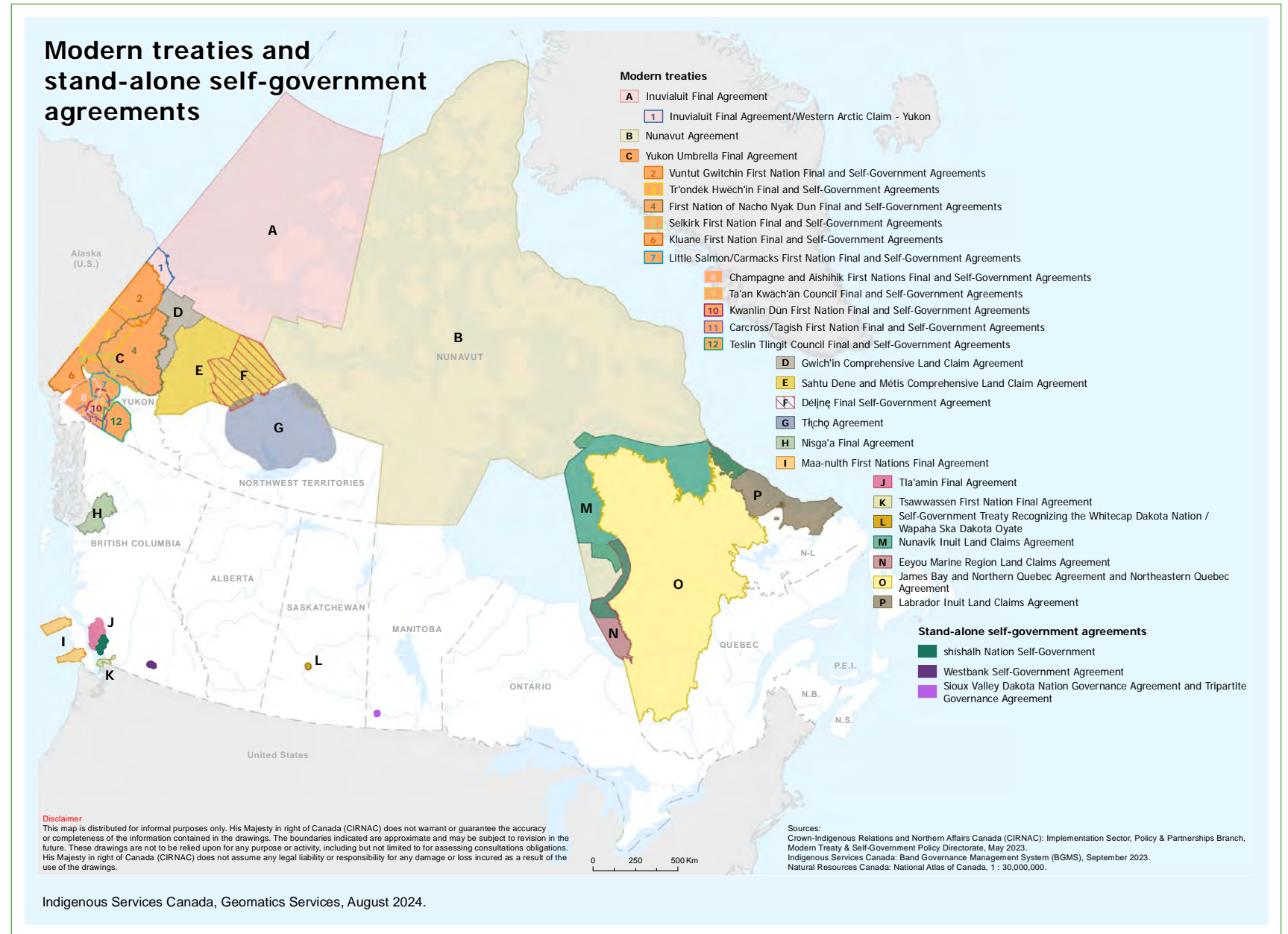


**INSIGHTS**



*Settler society can help by not creating a racist, hostile political environment in which nations have to work. There's a need for real authentic signaling and practice on the part of governments and corporations, to the effect of: 'we believe you and support you as authorities with powers that exceed ours.'*

*– Matthew Wildcat, Ermineskin Cree Nation, PhD, Assistant Professor, University of Alberta*



## INSIGHTS

### ***Necessary conditions for self-governance***

The youth and specialists stress that Indigenous leaders must be given sufficient space to do the work of rebuilding these systems without non-Indigenous interference or imposition of western metrics of success. Moreover, Indigenous governments should be afforded similar space as settler governments had in its nation-building efforts to learn and make mistakes without the fear that it will all be taken away if “settler milestones” are not met.

Restoring effective self-governance requires that these systems move towards a vision set out by the community. As such, the specialists we spoke with call for results-based processes and Indigenous forms of evaluation rooted in a community’s values and cultural context when assessing outcomes, such as governance assessment tools and community-developed quality of life frameworks.<sup>26</sup>

The youth assure that in the pursuit of self-government, there are still opportunities for learning and collaboration. They remind those fearful of what it could mean if full jurisdiction were to be returned to Indigenous communities: Indigenous governance would emphasize more community-centered and inclusive decision-making. While settler governments are premised on the exercise of exclusive authority, and colonial policies on eradication, many traditional Indigenous principles of relational governance, however, preserve space for intentional co-governance structures and processes where Indigenous nations deem it appropriate. The future holds promise in what intergovernmental relations could embody if reconciliation continues to be advanced.

“

*There’s a fear that if we ‘fail’ then that’s the only shot we get. This places a lot of pressure on Indigenous leaders to ‘get it right’ the first time without the recognition that we need to learn and try and adjust.”*

– Gladys Rowe, PhD, Muskego Inniniw, Fox Lake Cree Nation

#### 4. Make space for Indigenous community-led and modernized forms of governance outside the Indian Act that re-roots and supports self-determination

The Canadian government and other partners can begin to reverse its long history of denying Indigenous self-governance by affirming the sovereignty of Indigenous nations undertaking this work, respecting their laws and working with these nations to return full jurisdiction over their lands and affairs. This includes prioritizing opening up novel funding arrangements, economic possibilities and pathways to prosperity led by Indigenous nations and facilitating self-governing communities to achieve true independence.



**Governance in action:**

- ♦ Inuvialuit Regional Corporation tripartite child and family services law implementation support
- ♦ Métis Nation–Saskatchewan Kishchi Mashinaayikun Ooshchi Michif bilateral self-government agreement following withdrawal from Bill C-53

#### 5. Adopt Indigenous-led evaluation and measurement of progress

The Canadian government and other partners can support Indigenous-led measurement of impact of agreements and programs by collaborating with Indigenous leadership and specialists to develop culturally relevant evaluation processes, ensuring Indigenous models are respected. This includes engaging diverse community members in evaluation planning and implementation; adopting community-determined definitions of “success,” impact and progress, and prioritizing community-identified goals and outcomes; incorporating relevant Indigenous Traditional Knowledge and methodologies (e.g., storytelling), protocols and ways of organizing (e.g., consensus-based decision-making); respecting Indigenous data sovereignty; and ensuring evaluation is continuous and adequately funded.



**Indigenous-led performance measurement in action:**

- ♦ Thunderbird Partnership Foundation's Native Wellness Assessment (NWA)<sup>TM</sup> tool to measure impacts of cultural interventions on individual wellness from a strengths-based view





## Case study: Honouring T̓silhqot̓in Nation's self-determination through negotiating the Gwets'en Nilt'i Pathway Agreement (GNPA)

Under the GNPA, the T̓silhqot̓in Nation, the Government of Canada and Province of British Columbia committed to working together to transform the lives of T̓silhqot̓in citizens by closing gaps in key areas of wellbeing; recognizing and implementing T̓silhqot̓in governance and law; and establishing new fiscal relationships based on stable, predictable and flexible funding. The Agreement enables the Nation to pursue self-governance that is culturally relevant, meets the needs of its community, and functions outside the *Indian Act*.

### **Background**

T̓silhqot̓in Nation's pursuit for recognition of their sovereignty dates back to European encroachment on their lands. In 1864, after its successful war against the colonial government, T̓silhqot̓in war Chiefs were betrayed during peace negotiations. Six Chiefs were wrongly arrested, tried for murder and hanged. The T̓silhqot̓in Nation have since asserted original title over their traditional territories in spite of Canada's imposition of the *Indian Act*.

In 2014, the T̓silhqot̓in Supreme Court of Canada decision was the first declaration of Aboriginal title in Canadian history, recognizing the T̓silhqot̓in Nation as owners of a portion of their traditional territory. Later that year, the Premier of British Columbia apologized for the wrongful hanging of the T̓silhqot̓in war chiefs and committed to working together to form a Political Accord, signed in 2016.

In 2019, the T̓silhqot̓in Nation, the Government of Canada and Province of British Columbia signed the GNPA, which was renewed in 2024 for another five years. This first-of-its-kind Agreement, negotiated outside of the auspices of the Government of Canada's self-government negotiation process, commits the Parties to bring "transformative change" to the lives of the T̓silhqot̓in people and to their relationship with the government and reflects the First Nations' collective pursuits for lasting reconciliation with the provincial and federal governments. →

### → **Outcomes**

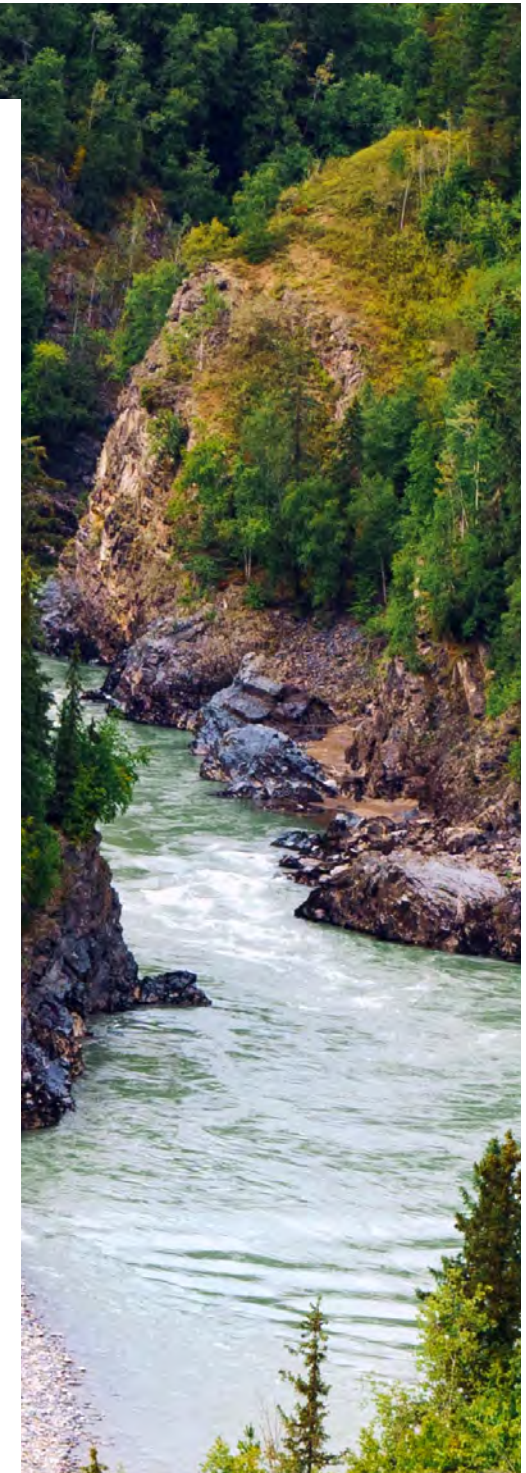
Through the GNPA, the T̓silhqot̓in National government has undertaken nation-building efforts founded on their ‘8 Pillars’ of change as identified by its communities: T̓silhqot̓in governance, language and culture, children and families, healthy communities, justice, education and training, T̓silhqot̓in Nen (lands, water and resources), and economic development. Initiatives include:

- ♦ Conservation laws including the Wildlife Law and a proposed Water Law
- ♦ Indigenous-led emergency management
- ♦ New homes and renovations in all member communities
- ♦ Ongoing work to reclaim jurisdiction over children and families
- ♦ A skills and training working group with the provincial government

The nation visualizes its governing framework as a river system, based on their unique culture as the people of the river. It also established its Ts’iqi Dechen Jedilhtan (Women’s Council), honouring its matrilineal traditions, and holds regular Unity Gatherings bringing members together, from youth to Elders, to work on governance development and discuss their laws, history and future.

### **Best Practices**

- ♦ **Meeting** with First Nations leadership and communities **on their lands** to rebuild relationships
- ♦ Beginning with **truth telling** to understand the true history of Indigenous Peoples’ experiences
- ♦ Redressing past harms by issuing **formal acknowledgments and apologies**
- ♦ **Community-informed** and **culturally relevant** self-governance that is truly independent
- ♦ **Capacity-building** for community members to support nation-building efforts
- ♦ **Outcomes-driven** initiatives based on objectives **identified by Indigenous communities**



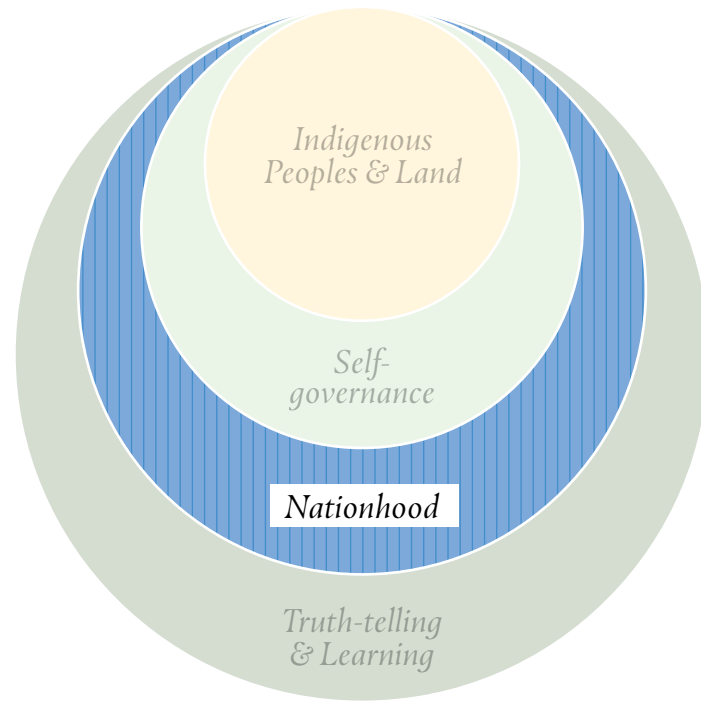


### *3. Instill reciprocity by honouring Indigenous nationhood*





## INSIGHTS



Indigenous sovereignty also manifests in the ways through which Indigenous nations relate to other collectives, including the Canadian nation state, other Indigenous nations, and non-Indigenous systems and entities such as corporations.

Generally, Indigenous worldviews and approaches to political authority and governance embrace coexistence.<sup>27</sup> Indigenous sovereignty recognizes the interdependence of and among Indigenous and non-Indigenous nations as related political actors. The youth told us that honouring Indigenous nationhood means moving away from hierarchical relationships and power dynamics between Indigenous nations and the Crown, towards nation-to-nation relations rooted in principles of mutuality and reciprocity.

Honouring Indigenous nationhood also means honouring Indigenous legal orders. This is because laws are the structures that define and guide relationships. To build genuine nation-to-nation relationships between Indigenous nations and the Canadian nation state, Indigenous laws and legal principles must be reflected and given equal weight. As the youth shared, Indigenous nations should have an equal say in setting the norms, expectations, and rules that define how we live together.

***“I think most businesses and governments see Indigenous nations and communities as barriers rather than collaborators. We want economic success for our communities, too. We’re out here trying to live our best lives, too. Instead of trying to go through us, why don’t you work with us?”***

“

*The way that everything is set up puts us in a position of vulnerability, being at the bottom of a hierarchy, rather than being seen as different nations and different people that live on shared territory.”*

## INSIGHTS

When we asked what just nation-to-nation relations could or should look like, the youth and Indigenous and non-Indigenous scholars alike spoke about re-orienting relationships around the first principles of mutual respect, coexistence, and non-interference. Indigenous nations have emphasized and applied these principles for centuries, including in pre-colonial diplomatic and treaty relations. For example, the Original Peoples of the Great Lakes region and northeastern North America developed a legal concept referred to as “A Dish with One Spoon” to describe how land (the dish) can be shared by all its inhabitants (the spoon) in a spirit of mutual cooperation.<sup>28</sup> This concept was central to peace treaties between the Haudenosaunee and Anishinaabe Peoples. In particular, a treaty made between the Anishinaabe and Haudenosaunee nations at Montreal in 1701, as part of the Great Peace of Montreal, is usually called the Dish With One Spoon treaty and its associated Dish With One Spoon wampum (treaty belt) was ratified at this treaty gathering.

The principles of mutual respect, coexistence, and non-interference were also brought in, via treaties, to the founding of the relationship between Indigenous nations and the Crown. The Two-Row Wampum, for example, is often interpreted as a visual representation of these principles. It consists of two parallel rows of purple and white beads woven together, representing two vessels traveling side by side on the river of life. The first purple row represents the Peoples of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy and their laws, culture, and way of life. The second row represents the European settlers and their laws, culture, and way of life. The two rows run parallel, without crossing or interfering with each other, symbolizing the importance of respect and peaceful coexistence between equals.

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the principles of mutual respect, non-interference, and peaceful coexistence were enshrined in various bilateral agreements and international declarations, notably including the Sino-Indian Agreement of 1954, also known as the Panchsheel Agreement, and the 1970 UN Declaration on Principles of International Law Concerning Friendly Relations and Cooperation Among States, which is now considered customary international law.<sup>29</sup>



*Dish with One Spoon wampum*

### Mutual respect

Mutual respect involves honouring and valuing the inherent rights, dignity, and sovereignty of each nation. It requires acknowledging and appreciating cultural differences, including different governance systems and legal orders, and building relationships based on equality and trust. This principle underscores the importance of listening to and learning from one another, engaging in good faith, and recognizing each nation's unique perspectives.

***“It’s about being very respectful that [...] people are going to say no, people are going to put up and enforce their boundaries and sovereign nations have the right to do that, and that needs to be respected. It shouldn’t be like, oh well, how can we make this happen anyway? I think that that really needs to be seen.”***

### Coexistence

Coexistence refers to the state of different nations living and working together in harmony, with each respecting the others' sovereignty and ways of life. Central to this principle is the ability to share land and resources while maintaining distinct cultural identities and governance structures. Coexistence is rooted in the understanding that diverse nations can thrive side by side, engaging in cooperative relationships that provide mutual benefits.

***“Take a step back, let us be in the spaces we’re supposed to be in, and lead in the spaces we’re supposed to lead in.”***

### Non-interference

Non-interference in the context of nation-to-nation relations means refraining from actions that would harm or impede another nation's self-determination, governance, or cultural practices. Living this principle means respecting the autonomy and decision-making processes of other nations without imposing external control. This does not necessarily entail complete exclusion or separation between nations; rather, this principle envisions nations interacting as equals, supporting each other's sovereignty and right to self-governance without encroachment or coercion.

***“If you are connected and maintain those close relationships with community, then you will know what is wanted; if not, you can always ask. Being close and listening to one another is better than staying separate. Be close, listen, build relationships; and those relationships will generate knowledge of how to work together in a way that doesn’t interfere.”***

– Elizabeth Carlson-Manathara, PhD, Associate Professor, Laurentian University



## INSIGHTS

For many Indigenous Peoples, treaties are not merely contracts but are sacred agreements that establish the terms of coexistence, non-interference, and mutual respect. Understood this way, treaties represent enduring commitments to shared stewardship and peaceful relations, grounded in the principles of partnership and mutual benefit, rather than subjugation or assimilation. However, until recently, the Canadian government's approach to treaties with Indigenous nations has reflected a colonial mindset, treating them as instruments of land cession and control rather than as frameworks for maintaining ongoing, equitable nation-to-nation relationships.

Restoring just relations between Indigenous nations and the Canadian government involves a return to and revitalization of the principles and commitments enshrined in treaties—actualizing the visions brought into the founding of the relationship and honouring the spirit and intent of these original agreements. Repairing relations also involves honouring instructions given by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls National Inquiry, and the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples to governments to act on in earnest.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

### 6. Affirm and uphold treaties

**Governments and businesses** are at a timely juncture to rebuild relationships with First Nations, Inuit, and Métis nations by resolving key issues and implementing treaty commitments. This work may include opening Indigenous-led tables for treaty member nations and collectives to negotiate existing and future arrangements with governments that align with treaty principles and support Indigenous community-centered implementation.



#### ***Treaty relations in action:***

- ♦ *Agreement on Cree Nation Governance Between The Crees of Eeyou Istchee and the Government of Canada*
- ♦ *First Nation-led and asserted Jay Treaty implementation through Haudenosaunee passports*

## 7. Advance judicial recognition of Indigenous laws and interpretations

**In order to advance reconciliation and more just outcomes**, legal education (in law schools and continuing legal education), especially for practitioners who are going to deal with legal issues in which Indigenous Peoples or Nations are implicated, should include increased familiarization with Indigenous legal principles and laws and interpreting the law through Indigenous lenses.

## 8. Collaborate on a nation-to-nation basis

**Governments** are well-positioned and would help advance sovereign relations by working with Indigenous nations to modify policies and reintegrate traditional nation-to-nation relations that reflect Indigenous laws and principles. This work would include co-developing bilateral (federal government to Indigenous nation) and tripartite relationship agreements (inclusive of provincial governments) that extend beyond government administration terms to provide a forum for long-term planning, investment, and coordination with provincial and territorial governments to clarify jurisdiction and simplify processes in advancing Crown-Indigenous negotiations.



### ***Collaboration in action:***

- ♦ *2015 Political Accord between First Nations and the Government of Ontario*



## Case study: Restoring just relations through diligent implementation of treaty promises

In July 2024, the Supreme Court of Canada issued a unanimous decision in *Ontario (Attorney General) v Restoule*, confirming that the Crown has a duty of diligent implementation of treaty promises rooted in the honour of the Crown.<sup>50</sup> The Court held that Anishinaabe beneficiaries to the Robinson Treaties must be compensated for the Crown's failure to uphold its sacred promise to share the wealth derived from lands within the treaty territories. Since April 2022, Canada, Ontario, and the 21 Robinson Huron Treaty First Nations negotiated a treaty annuity settlement outside the courts.

### **Background**

In 1850, the Anishinaabe of the Upper Great Lakes region entered into the Robinson Huron and Robinson Superior Treaties with the Crown, stipulating a perpetual annual payment to the Anishinaabe, with an “augmentation clause” for potential increases at the Crown's discretion. Despite substantial revenues generated from the treaty lands, annuity payments remained at \$4 per member since 1875. In 2012, the Anishinaabe treaty beneficiaries took legal action against Canada and Ontario, asserting that the Crown had a treaty obligation to increase the annuity payments.

Notably, at the trial level, the parties agreed to include Anishinaabe cultural protocols: to hold the hearings not only in courtrooms but also in several Anishinaabe communities; to recognize ceremonies (e.g., smudging) at the opening and closing of hearings; and to engage in Anishinaabe education on key ceremonies, teachings, and legal principles. The trial judge's written decision invoked Anishinaabe legal principles of kinship, reciprocity, and *ishkode* (fire) to understand the treaty relationship.<sup>51</sup>

On appeal, the Supreme Court of Canada unanimously ruled that the Crown had indeed breached the Robinson Treaties and criticized its failure to act honourably and diligently in fulfilling the annuity promise. Despite Ontario's argument that the Crown retained discretion over the adjustment of annuity payments, the court determined that the Crown has an obligation to assess the feasibility of increasing annuities and that its exercise of discretion is reviewable by the courts.

### **Outcomes**

The Supreme Court's decision unequivocally confirms the Crown's breach of annuity promises under the Robinson Treaties for the

past 150 years and affirms the courts' authority to hold the Crown accountable for its failure to uphold treaty promises. Moreover, the decision reinforces the legally binding nature of treaties on the Crown and affirms that the full range of judicial remedies, including compensation and damages, is available for treaty breaches. Significantly, the Court recognized that the Anishinaabe treaty parties' perspectives on the treaties are shaped by their inherent laws, governance systems, and values.

### **Best Practices**

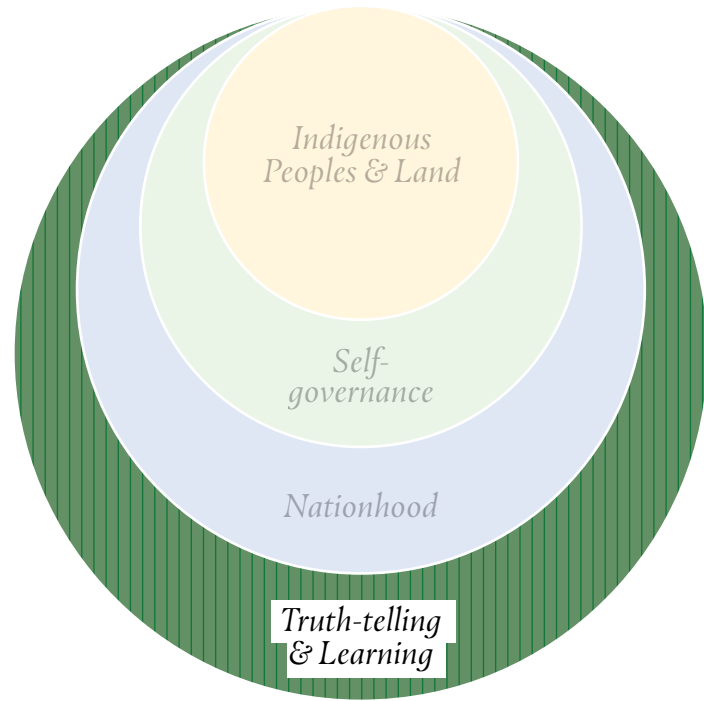
- ♦ Undertaking **judicial education** on Indigenous laws and **adapting processes** to include Indigenous protocols
- ♦ Affording **equal weight and legitimacy** to the laws, ceremonies, and protocols of both legal systems in **trans-systemic litigation**
- ♦ **Incorporating Indigenous perspectives** in the legal interpretation of a treaty's meaning including the determination of the rights and obligations
- ♦ Interpreting treaties and treaty rights according to **the honour and integrity of the Crown**



*4. Take responsibility by  
engaging in truth-telling  
and learning*







### ***Indigenous narrative sovereignty***

The youth remind us that in pursuit of sovereignty, Indigenous Peoples must also have agency over their narratives. A long history of untrue telling of the past, the use of harmful language and the deliberate perpetuation of colonial stereotypes and constructs—namely an imagined native inferiority—has meant that colonial perspectives continue to influence the public’s understanding and sentiment towards Indigenous issues while also denying Canada’s long history of perpetuating harm against Indigenous Peoples.<sup>52</sup> In the absence of a national dialogue on issues over the past few decades, mainstream media, including film, television and the news, has played the largest role in shaping the stories told about Indigenous Peoples in Canada.

## INSIGHTS

Stereotypes rooted in harmful and racist beliefs about Indigenous Peoples and their cultures are deeply entrenched in the press. The tendency to misrepresent Indigenous issues and Peoples while also remaining relatively silent on the structural and systemic challenges they face has prevailed in Canadian media:

- ♦ **Biased coverage:** One media monitoring study analyzing news coverage of the Wet'suwet'en resistance against pipeline construction found that only two of nine media outlets mostly practiced “more neutral and objective” reporting, while the remainder excluded Indigenous voices, homogenized their perspectives, and decentered Indigenous impacts more than 50% of the time. Four of the nine outlets took an “anti-protest” stance in the majority of its articles, while one demonstrated a mildly “anti-Indigenous” stance 40% of the time.<sup>33</sup>
- ♦ **Stereotypes and misrepresentation:** One analysis of the coverage of Indigenous welfare recipients in Canadian print news, between 1990 and 2015 found that these articles predominantly focus on unemployment rates among Indigenous communities, as well as Indigenous Peoples' experiences with the criminal justice system and supposed dependence on welfare. For example, 350 articles in the sample explicitly described unemployment in these communities as a result of choice or one's own fault, while only 5% of the articles from this period referred to the employment-related barriers that Indigenous people face, such as workplace discrimination and biased hiring practices.<sup>34</sup>

In their interactions in the workplace, at school, and in public settings, the youth come up against these pre-existing assumptions and misconceptions that homogenize and infantilize Indigenous Peoples and an overall problematic apathy towards modern Indigenous realities. This ignorance includes a lack of understanding of the history and intergenerational effects of colonization and the systemic factors that continue to serve as obstacles. The youth shared that these misconceptions are antithetical to their communities' and own assertions of sovereignty.



*It really starts with changing mindsets. When I consider the individual interactions that I've had with some folks that have a certain perception or stereotype of Indigenous people, I can tell during our interaction that it is just what we are seeing on a larger scale in interactions with businesses and governments and the general public.”*

## INSIGHTS

They made it clear that upholding sovereignty includes addressing these legacies and decolonizing mindsets toward Indigenous Peoples and what they are capable of achieving. The youth tell us, that in addition to learning the true histories, we must also change how we think about the challenges that Indigenous communities in Canada face by adopting a strengths-based lens to better appreciate and value the unique contributions of Indigenous knowledge systems and ways of doing.

Doing so requires Indigenous communities to reclaim these narratives and raise awareness through storytelling and truth-telling on their own terms.<sup>55</sup> Storytelling and oral traditions play an integral role in preserving Indigenous cultures and connect individuals and communities to both the past and present as well as each other. According to the specialists we interviewed, it is also an important act of resurgence, and a powerful form of decolonizing education and working relations when collaborating with Indigenous communities.

Truth telling matters—and it makes a difference. We are starting to see the shift in Canadians' increased awareness and improved attitudes towards Indigenous Peoples. Following the release of the *Truth and Reconciliation Commission's 94 calls to action* in 2015, a number of initiatives have tracked our nation's progress. The 2021 Focus Canada survey, conducted by the Environics Institute, found a growing willingness among Canadians to say that the policies of Canadian governments, and not Indigenous Peoples themselves, are the main obstacle to achieving economic and social equality. The number of people citing government policies as the problem rose from 26% in 2016 to 37% in 2021, while those citing Indigenous Peoples themselves dropped by 10 percentage points.<sup>56</sup> Similarly, the Canadian Reconciliation Barometer's latest report (2023) found that awareness of the mistreatment of Indigenous Peoples in Canada continues to grow, with 90% of non-Indigenous reporting having previously heard of residential schools, up from 65% in 2021.<sup>57</sup> Indigenous-led truth telling continues to change public perceptions of Indigenous Peoples.

“

*A reconciled environment means letting go of the notion that 'we're saving Native people and that they're helpless.' We must recognize that we're on equal footing.”*



## INSIGHTS

Realistic and nuanced representations of contemporary Indigenous issues in film also make a difference. Analysis done by the USC Norman Lear Center and IllumiNative in the United States found that viewers of the popular series *Reservation Dogs*, which centers on the lives of working-class Native Americans living on-reservation, were more likely (67%) than non-viewers (62%) to identify false statements about Native American issues and showed greater support for policies like the *Indian Child Welfare Act*. They were also less likely to agree with statements like “the United States has done enough for Native peoples” and “We must move on from the past treatment of Native Peoples,” with the average level of agreement being 2.3-2.6/5 for viewers versus 2.7-2.9/5 for non-viewers.<sup>58</sup>

However, there is still a long way to go, and as the youth shared with us, changing mindsets cannot fall on Indigenous Peoples alone. IYR’s 2024 Indigenous Youth Reconciliation Barometer study found that many youths described allyship as the responsibility of non-Indigenous Canadians, especially when it manifests in building inclusivity and using their privilege(s) to break down and challenge oppressive systems.<sup>59</sup> The Canadian government and media must also take responsibility in correcting false narratives around Indigenous Peoples and Canada’s history by uplifting Indigenous voices and prioritize sharing uncomfortable truths over settler comfort. We must also take responsibility in our individual interactions. The emotional burden of educating and correcting peers who have not undertaken the work of learning cannot continue to fall on their Indigenous neighbours.

**“It often feels like as Indigenous folks, we’re doing a lot of the heavy lifting when it comes to reconciliation. We have allies who are great at buying in, but then there’s other folks who are not going to go out of their way to learn, perhaps because there’s that sense of shame there about the truth telling. You would be shocked by the amount of people who can’t even say words like white supremacy and racism without visibly flinching.”**

**“As good as the current education we have for youth and young people is, we need to have all Canadians start learning about the truth about Indigenous and settler histories. There’s a knowledge gap there. It’s about getting comfortable with the uncomfortable and knowing that the system that we live in is inherently settler colonial, white supremacist, racist.”**

According to the youth, advancing sovereignty requires personal work from all Canadians. It is imperative that as a nation we move past apathy, overwhelm, and ignorance. This requires engaging with Indigenous-led processes of truth telling and learning in ways that do not overburden Indigenous individuals in that work and doing this is a responsibility that all Canadians have.

**“Non-Indigenous Canadians, settlers, have not been willing to devote their bandwidth to thinking about Indigenous Peoples. If you’re Indigenous, you have no choice but to know and understand Canadian society. The opposite is not true. There must be a widespread commitment to dealing with the distinctiveness of Indigenous peoples. Until that happens, we’ll always be handcuffed by a lack of capacity in trying to navigate relationships.”**

– Matthew Wildcat, Ermineskin Cree Nation, PhD, Assistant Professor, University of Alberta

## 9. Make space for Indigenous-led storytelling and stories

**Governments, businesses in the media and entertainment industry, research institutions, and cultural and heritage institutions** serve a critical role in actively supporting truth-telling by creating meaningful opportunities for Indigenous creators to share their stories. This includes funding and commissioning Indigenous-led media projects in film, television, podcasts, and literature; supporting repatriation of cultural artifacts and historical records that allow communities to reconnect with their heritage; establishing (co-)ownership models of intellectual property for Indigenous content creators that honour Indigenous data sovereignty; and creating mentorship programs that support emerging Indigenous artists.



### **Supporting Indigenous storytelling in action:**

- ♦ *Rogers Indigenous Film Production Fund*
- ♦ *Mount Royal University and Shaw Communications Inc. Community Podcast Initiative*

## 10. Take up personal responsibility by learning and being inclusive of Indigenous values

**All Canadians and institutions** can be part of the nation's cultural shift by respectfully engaging with Indigenous cultures and teachings in Indigenous-informed ways that promote respectful relations. This journey can involve acknowledging the land in daily life by learning the local history from Indigenous accounts; supporting Indigenous-led educational programs in schools, universities, and public institutions; participating in cultural events like powwows, Indigenous-led workshops, art exhibits and festivals; and collaborating with local Indigenous communities and knowledge keepers to integrate approaches to cultural and knowledge exchange initiatives.



### **Inclusivity in action:**

- ♦ *Star Wars (Anangong Miigaading), A New Hope: An alliance to revitalize the Anishinaabemowin (Ojibwe) language*
- ♦ *Wake the Giant Festival and cultural awareness initiative*



## Case study: Establishing the Indigenous Screen Office (ISO) to elevate Indigenous storytelling

As Canada's only independent and Indigenous-led national advocacy and funding organization serving First Nations, Métis and Inuit creators of screen content in Canada, the ISO supports Indigenous narrative sovereignty through storytelling on screen. The organization takes a community-responsive approach to fostering cultural revitalization by increasing Indigenous storytelling on screens and promoting Indigenous values and participation across the broadcasting sector through funding, advocacy, training and partnerships with major platforms and film festivals.

### **Background**

ISO was proposed in 2017, when Canada Media Fund engaged Indigenous writers, directors, producers, and broadcasters and funders to develop a strategy to bolster representation of Indigenous peoples in Canadian media and better support the Indigenous screen-based media sector.

This engagement highlighted the systemic barriers Indigenous industry members face in getting their stories made and seen and called upon mainstream broadcasters to act on their responsibilities under the *Broadcasting Act* to reflect more Indigenous content. In addition to difficulties in accessing distribution, they identified fragmented and inadequate funding, barriers to production (i.e., capacity, diversity of Indigenous languages, cost of travel to remote and northern locations, etc.), a lack of Indigenous representation in decision-making positions, and insufficient professional development and capacity-building opportunities as challenges Indigenous storytellers face.

ISO was proposed to consolidate Indigenous-dedicated media funding under an Indigenous-led agency to support the development, production and marketing of Indigenous screen-based media content, and facilitate relationships between Indigenous industry and funding agencies. →



### → **Outcomes**

Since its inception, ISO has achieved significant milestones in its mission to lead systemic change and empower Indigenous storytellers.

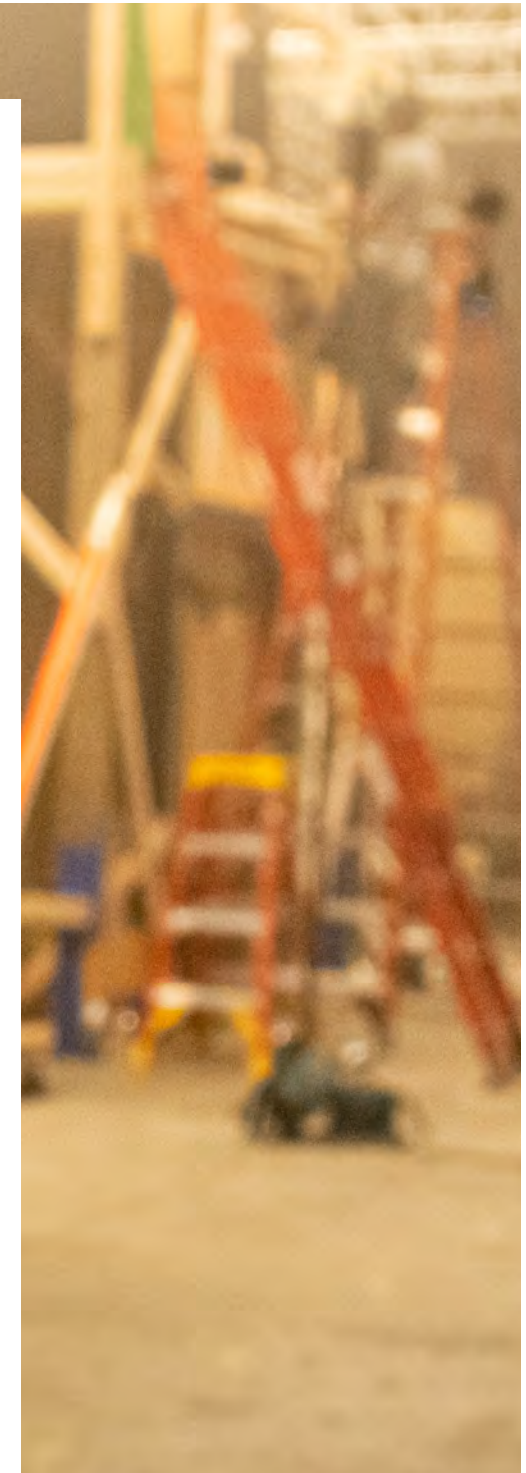
Following a multi-pronged advocacy campaign, ISO secured permanent federal funding from Canadian Heritage—including \$65 million over five years starting in 2024-2025 and \$13 million per year in ongoing support—and saw the development of new legislation enshrined in the *Canadian Broadcasting Act* recognizing Indigenous content as one of the pillars of our nation's broadcasting system.

Having been approved as a Certified Independent Production Fund and included under the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission's new broadcasting framework, ISO will also receive significant base funding under the *Online Streaming Act*, which will require online streaming platforms to allocate a portion of their revenues to support Canadian content.

In 2023, ISO disbursed \$11.9 million to a diverse community of 236 recipients, supporting projects across Canada and using a wide array of Indigenous languages. ISO also led the way in collaborations with non-Indigenous entities, administering the Canada Media Fund's \$10 million Indigenous program, and partnering with CBC and APTN to deliver the Early-Stage Scripted Development Program, and with Paramount+ and the Pacific Screenwriting Program to create the Indigenous Screenwriters Lab.

### **Best Practices**

- ◆ **Meaningful engagement** process with relevant Indigenous groups
- ◆ **Indigenous-led** action in achieving positive outcomes for Indigenous Peoples
- ◆ Providing **permanent funding**
- ◆ **Uplifting** relevant Indigenous parties by connecting them to resources and industry networks
- ◆ Enshrining support in **legislation** and **policy directives**
- ◆ Non-Indigenous entities **partnering to co-administer** and **co-lead** programs and funds



## CONCLUSION

When asked what they consider the most applicable definitions of reconciliation, Indigenous youth overall felt that it means ‘honouring treaties,’ ‘land back,’ ‘self-governance for all Indigenous Peoples,’ ‘ending institutional racism,’ and ‘access to education,’<sup>40</sup> generally aligning with the priority policy areas identified by the IYR youth we worked with in developing this report series. When all recommendations that have been put forward to date are achieved, this can advance reconciliation.

The image to the right embodies what the Indigenous youth leaders hope for their communities, and their vision for future relations when sovereignty is honoured and reconciliation is acted upon:

For many Indigenous youth in Canada, true reconciliation is being able to look around and see examples of one’s culture reflected around them and that the world they live in reflects their values:

- **Freedom to self-express and live according to one’s principles (Creator’s instructions)**
- **A clean and healthy environment**
- **More art and storytelling that reflects Indigenous Peoples’ stories and cultures is visible**
- **They are cared for and provided for (access to infrastructure and prosperity opportunities)**

Doing the work of advancing sovereignty is about working collaboratively so that the necessary conditions are in place for true reconciliation to take shape. Our shared journey has only just begun.



*Appendix*



# Glossary of Terms

**Co-management:** Local to regional-scale institutional arrangements intended to share some measure of control and authority for decisions about specific resources—commonly wildlife, fisheries, lands, protected areas, and water—between governments and resource users.<sup>41</sup>

**First Nations, Métis, and Inuit (FNMI):** First Nations, Métis, and Inuit are distinct Indigenous groups in Canada, each with their own unique histories, cultures, identities, and governance structures.

- First Nations are the original inhabitants of specific territories within Canada and have distinct languages, cultures, and governance systems. First Nations communities are spread across the country, with over 600 recognized First Nations in Canada.
- Métis are people of mixed European and First Nations ancestry with connections to an historic Métis community or settlement and are accepted by a modern Métis community. The Métis Nation emerged as a distinct Indigenous people in the historic Northwest during the late 18th century, when Métis communities developed along the fur trade routes and across the Prairie provinces of Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and Alberta, as well as parts of Ontario, British Columbia, the Northwest Territories, and the northern United States.
- The Inuit are the Indigenous Peoples who primarily inhabit the Arctic regions of Canada, Greenland, and Alaska. They have a distinct language, Inuktitut, and a rich cultural heritage rooted in their close relationship with the Arctic environment.

**Indigenous:** A term used globally to collectively refer to the original inhabitants of a particular place. The Canadian Constitution recognizes three distinct groups of Indigenous Peoples: First Nations, Métis, and Inuit.

**Inherent rights:** The fundamental and inalienable rights that all individuals and peoples possess by virtue of their humanity and existence. These rights are considered inherent because they are not granted or bestowed by any external authority. In the context of self-determination, this includes the right to establish and maintain their own political, economic, social, and cultural institutions, as well as the right to preserve and develop their own identities, languages, and cultures.

**Oral traditions:** The transmission and preservation of knowledge, history, cultural practices, and stories through spoken word and other non-written means. They are an integral part of many cultures around the world, providing a sense of identity, continuity, and collective memory within a community or society. Through oral traditions, communities maintain a connection to their past, their ancestors, and their cultural heritage.

**Reconciliation:** In 2015, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC)—set up in 2008 to document the effects of residential schools on Indigenous Peoples—defined reconciliation as the process of “establishing and maintaining a mutually respectful relationship between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples in this country.”<sup>42</sup> The TRC also said reconciliation requires “awareness of the past, an acknowledgement of the harm that has been inflicted, atonement for the causes, and action to change behaviour.”<sup>43</sup> To learn more, read the TRC’s final report *Honouring the Truth, Reconciling for the Future*.

**Residential schools:** Residential schools operated across Canada from the late 19th century until the late 20th century. These schools were established by the Canadian government and operated by various religious organizations, primarily the Roman Catholic and Anglican churches, with the aim of assimilating Indigenous children into Euro-Canadian culture. The origin of residential schools can be traced back to the 1876 Indian Act, which gave the Canadian government the authority to remove Indigenous children from their families and communities and place them in these schools. The purpose of residential schools was to eradicate Indigenous languages, cultures, and traditions, and to assimilate Indigenous children into Western values and practices.

The residential school system caused immense harm, including physical, emotional, and sexual abuse, cultural suppression, and the loss of identity. Thousands of children died at the schools; the National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation has death records for around 4,100 children but has indicated that the true total is likely much higher.<sup>44</sup> For survivors, the forced separation from families, communities, and cultural practices disrupted the transmission of language, cultural knowledge, and traditional ways of life. This resulted in a loss of cultural continuity and a disconnection from Indigenous heritage for tens of thousands of children, the intergenerational impacts of which are still felt today. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, in its 2015 report, described the residential school system as a case of cultural genocide, as these schools “were part of a coherent policy to eliminate Aboriginal people as distinct peoples and to assimilate them into the Canadian mainstream against their will.”<sup>45</sup>

**Self-determination:** A basic human right, enshrined in international law, that refers to the ability of individuals or communities to make decisions and choices that shape their own lives, without external interference or coercion. This right is particularly significant for Indigenous Peoples and those living under colonial rule or foreign occupation. Self-determination is often associated with concepts of autonomy, sovereignty, and independence.

**Settler colonialism:** A specific form of colonialism in which settlers from an external society establish permanent and often dominant communities on the lands of Indigenous Peoples, resulting in the displacement, marginalization, and subjugation of the original inhabitants. It involves the establishment of new societies, structures and institutions with the intention of permanently replacing or assimilating the existing Indigenous societies, resulting in continued harms to this day.

**Time immemorial:** Denotes a period of time extending beyond memory or recorded history. It signifies a time so far back in the past that it predates any specific date or event that can be recalled or documented. The term is often employed in legal, historical, and cultural contexts to establish the long-standing presence or rights of certain groups, particularly Indigenous Peoples, in a particular territory. It emphasizes the deep historical connection and continuous occupation of a land by a specific community or culture, asserting their ancestral ties and the longevity of their presence.

**Turtle Island:** The name used by many Indigenous Nations in Canada for lands now known as North America. The name comes from various Creation stories from respective Nations. According to the Anishinaabe Creation story, at a time when the planet was covered in water, different animals tried and failed to swim to the bottom of the ocean to bring back dirt to create land. A muskrat was the last animal to attempt the task—he succeeded, though he did not survive the journey. Waynaboozhoo, a supernatural being with the power to create life, took the soil from the muskrat's paws and placed it on the back of a turtle. Land thus formed and became Turtle Island.<sup>46</sup>

**Westphalian sovereignty:** A principle of international law that refers to each nation-state's supreme political authority and exclusive jurisdiction over its territory and domestic affairs, to the exclusion of all external powers. The doctrine is named after the Peace of Westphalia, the collective name for two peace treaties signed in 1648 that ended the Thirty Years' War in the Holy Roman Empire. It emerged as European powers were colonizing other parts of the world, and used to justify conquest and colonialism, including settler colonialism.<sup>47</sup> Westphalian sovereignty continues to uphold settler colonialism, as it considers Indigenous Peoples as participants within the nation state confines.

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Artwork: *Fire Medicine* by Dani LaValley, 2024



#### **ABOUT THE ARTIST**

*Dani LaValley is a two-spirit Michif/Cree/settler artist and educator from Treaty 6 territory. LaValley's family comes from Crooked Lake, Cowessess First Nation, Prince Albert, and Regina. They have been a self-taught beading artist since 2016 and have used the artist name Deadly.Beads since 2021 to share their beading journey online. LaValley's art is influenced by their cultures and relationship with the land. They share their beading skills and knowledge with youth and adults in their community through beading classes, clubs, and circles. LaValley attends local markets and events to trade and sell their creations. Dani currently lives, teaches, and creates on Treaty 4 territory in oskana kâ-asastêki.*



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