

## **The Support Conditions for Successful Implementation of Indigenization Processes within a Municipal-Level Poverty Elimination Strategy**

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### **Abstract**

This research examines the support conditions necessary for the successful implementation of Indigenization processes as a strategy for poverty elimination. Conducted in collaboration with End Poverty Edmonton (EPE), a municipal-level nonprofit focused on poverty elimination, the study employed qualitative methods, including surveys, one-on-one interviews, focus groups, and Indigenous approaches such as conversations and sharing circles. Findings indicate that successful Indigenization requires four key conditions: reciprocal relationships, collective advocacy, space for reflection and learning, and time for adaptive and incremental change. These factors emerged as essential for fostering trust, shifting power dynamics, and embedding Indigenous ways of knowing within systems. The research underscores that Indigenization is a collective effort requiring both Indigenous and non-Indigenous collaboration, strategic learning, and sustained commitment to systemic transformation. The findings contribute to broader discussions on decolonization, reconciliation, and policy change in municipal and organizational contexts.

### **Indigenization Statements**

I, Uchechi Anaduaka, am a migrant scholar of African background, currently residing on Treaty 7 Territory, the traditional lands of the Blackfoot Confederacy, Tsuut'ina, Îyâxe Nakoda Nations,

and the Métis Nation of Alberta, Region 3. I was based on Treaty 6 Territory and the Homeland of the Métis in Edmonton while contributing to this project. I am a non-Indigenous and uninvited guest on these lands. My role in this work involved collaborating with the research team to translate the evaluation of an Indigenous-led program into an academic article, in partnership with Indigenous leadership. I acknowledge my positionality and remain committed to conducting research with humility, reciprocity, and respect in support of decolonization and reconciliation.

Claire Brandenbarg (she/they) is a non-Indigenous researcher living in amiskwaciwâskahikan on Treaty 6 Territory, the ancestral lands of the Cree, Blackfoot, Metis, Nakota Sioux, Saulteaux, Dene, and Ojibway peoples. Claire is grateful for the traditional Knowledge Keepers and Elders from these communities that she has had the chance to meet and learn from, most recently concerning systems-level poverty elimination work. Claire acknowledges their positionality as an uninvited person living on Turtle Island and continually works to participate in right relations between this land and all the beings who call it home.

I, Janelle Knoop, am a non-Indigenous researcher of Dutch descent. I am currently an uninvited guest on unceded territory of the *lăkwəŋən* speaking people, the Songhees and Esquimalt nations. While contributing to this project, I was an uninvited guest on Treaty 6 Territory and the homeland of the Métis in amiskwaciwâskahikan (Edmonton). My role in this work was to co-create the evaluation plan, including development, design, implementation, and analysis, in collaboration with our Indigenous partners. I am committed to working alongside Indigenous Peoples with humility to foster partnerships grounded in relationality, reciprocity, and respect.

My government name is Karen Bruno. My spirit name is Pisim lskwew (Sun Women). I am originally from Samson Band, and I am nehiyawî (Cree), Dion-Buffalo on my mother's side and Mever/Wager on my father's side. I currently spend my time working to influence changing systems for our people to end poverty and especially for my grandchildren. I attend pow wow trails, cultural events, ceremony, and gather medicines in the summer. In the winter, I am like a bear: I rest and rejuvenate.

I, Maria Mayan, am a non-Indigenous scholar and uninvited guest residing on Treaty 6 Territory and the Homeland of the Métis. I have been an engaged scholar for more than 30 years, working alongside government, not-for-profit, structurally disadvantaged, and clinician communities to address the structural causes of inequity. This work has involved collaboration with Indigenous partners to support systemic change. I acknowledge my positionality and remain committed to working with respect, reciprocity, and humility to advance reconciliation and decolonization.

## Introduction

Indigenization is a keyword that has gained prominence in local media, government, and not-for-profits and has permeated Canadian discourse. It emerges as a transformative approach aimed at recognizing and embracing knowledge systems, traditions, and contributions of

Indigenous Peoples within a given society or context (Gaudry & Lorenz, 2018; Yakpo, 2024). Additionally, Indigenization is often positioned in relation to broader decolonization efforts and commitments to reconciliation (Antoine et al., 2018; Barton & Kahn-John, 2023).

Although decolonization and Indigenization are widely recognized as interconnected concepts, their relationship remains actively debated within Indigenous scholarship, and no consensus exists regarding their defining features or boundaries (Adams et al., 2017; Fernández et al., 2021; Smith, 2021). A comprehensive review of these concepts is beyond the scope of this paper; however, it is important to note that some scholars conceptualize Indigenization as one process within broader decolonization efforts (Gaudry & Lorenz, 2018; Smith, 2021), whereas others distinguish the two as related but conceptually distinct processes (Tuck & Yang, 2012). We understand Indigenization as emphasizing the restoration of Indigenous knowledges, values, and ways of being within existing systems, alongside the affirmation of Indigenous Peoples' sovereignty (Canadian Institute for Health Information, 2022), which has been historically disregarded, suppressed, and erased through colonialism (Antoine et al., 2018; Murphy et al., 2021; Waitoa & Dombroski, 2020). In this way, Indigenization does not simply shift attention away from colonial models but actively reorients practices and institutions toward Indigenous worldviews and priorities (Ng & Sim, 2006; Tusasiirwe, 2022).

This paper stems from the research conducted in 2022-2023 with the Indigenization Game Changer of End Poverty Edmonton (henceforth, EPE), a municipal-level nonprofit organization tasked with eliminating poverty in Edmonton (Knoop et al., 2024). EPE embraced Indigenization as one of its “Game Changers.” A game changer is a novel idea, strategy, or innovation that completely transforms or significantly impacts a situation, often in a positive way, to bring about important and far-reaching changes and outcomes (Policy Horizons Canada,

2019). EPE's Game Changers were anti-racism, inclusive economy, early learning and care, affordable housing, education, health services, transportation, and Indigenization. EPE viewed poverty elimination as an act of reconciliation and worked to address the root causes of poverty by facilitating collaboration, fostering innovation, and advocating for systems change as described by Knoop and colleagues (2024):

As a strategy for ending poverty, Indigenization involves working to end poverty in an Indigenous way. Indigenization in this context involves (1) ensuring the work of EPE reflects the needs and priorities of Indigenous Peoples in Edmonton and (2) Indigenizing the work of EPE through the reclamation and integration of Indigenous values and solutions in systems. (p. 6)

Systems change is inherently complex, requiring continual reflection, hypothesis testing, and insight-driven action (Mühlenbein, 2018). Learning is essential when an organization wants to tackle, propel, and achieve systems change. In this context, EPE, particularly the Indigenization game changer, sought to identify the support conditions for successful implementation of Indigenization processes aimed at fostering systems change. This research resulted from the partnership between the Directors of Indigenization, EPE's Indigenization Team, and the Community-University Partnership (henceforth, CUP) at the University of Alberta.

## **Background**

### **Canada and the Effects of Colonization**

Canada is a settler colonial state (Barker, 2009). Colonial activity began in earnest with the official settlement of the French explorers in Quebec in 1608 (Government of Canada, 2018). Upon arrival, the European navigators encountered Indigenous Peoples (ancestors of the First Nations peoples) with distinct cultures, languages, and ways of knowing with deep connections to lands (Wilson, 2018). The subsequent colonization irrevocably disrupted the

lives and livelihoods of Indigenous Peoples (Cusick, 2022), as the unilateral imposition of the 1867 Constitution and 1876 Indian Act granted European settlers sole authority over Indigenous Peoples, their lands, and resources (Kitz, 2019).

The reserve system, alongside racism and government policies toward Indigenous Peoples (e.g., the Indian Act), led to poverty, poor health, violence, and various forms of personal, familial, and societal genocide (Hele, 2023). Colonial actions also decimated social, cultural, and political norms. For instance, Indigenous Peoples were prevented from contributing to political discourse, speaking their traditional languages, practicing their culture, and teaching their children their history and traditions.

Research has documented both historical and ongoing presence of systemic racism towards Indigenous Peoples (Durand-Moreau et al., 2022; Findlay et al., 2023; Huff, 2001; Moss et al., 1991). These effects often span multiple generations (Bombay et al., 2009; Kim, 2019; Lines et al., 2019) due to the “lingering effects of colonization and various attempts at cultural genocide by the Canadian government” (St. Germaine, 2023, p. 4). The effects manifest in unique, layered, and complex ways, including physical, psychological, social, economic, and health inequalities and disadvantages (Anderson et al., 2016; Barton & Kahn-John, 2023; Bombay et al., 2009; Durand-Moreau et al., 2022; Huff, 2001; Jones, 2023; Kim, 2019; Lines et al., 2019; Paradies, 2016; Rarere et al., 2023; Smylie & Firestone, 2016; Thistle & Smylie, 2020).

### **Understanding Indigenization**

Indigenization is the process of integrating Indigenous knowledge, values, and practices into systems such as governance, education, health, economics, and culture (Gaudry & Lorenz, 2018; Tusasiirwe, 2022). It involves reclaiming spiritual connections to the land and re-

centering Indigenous perspectives within societal structures. To Indigenize is to adopt a holistic approach that incorporates land-based teachings and Indigenous leadership, including Ceremonial Keepers.

As a form of resurgence and re-centering (Grafton & Melançon, 2020, as cited in Debassige et al., 2022), Indigenization bridges Indigenous and Western knowledge through relational and collaborative approaches (Antoine et al., 2018). It challenges the dominance of Western paradigms and affirms Indigenous ways of knowing, learning, and being as equally valuable (Alatas, 2005; Antoine et al., 2018; Gaudry & Lorenz, 2018; Smith, 2021; Tusasiirwe, 2022; Waitoa & Dombroski, 2020). By infusing Indigenous perspectives across education, healthcare, and governance, Indigenization is understood as a pathway toward more equitable and inclusive systems (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015; Gaudry & Lorenz, 2018). The Indigenization process spans multiple dimensions, including language and culture, youth, health, legal justice, history, and reconciliation, and aligns with the Calls to Action of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (2015). To fully understand Indigenization, however, it is important to consider it alongside decolonization and reconciliation (Antoine et al., 2018; Tusasiirwe, 2022).

Decolonization refers to “the process of deconstructing colonial ideologies of the superiority and privilege of Western thought and approaches” (Antoine et al., 2018, para. 5). It is a project of re-centering (Mbembe, 2015) that “openly and directly seeks to question, dismantle, and reverse this past and present colonialism and its impacts” (Tusasiirwe, 2020, as cited in Tusasiirwe, 2022, p. 11). Practically, decolonization works in two ways: (1) challenging and decentering Western knowledge, values, and practices that perpetuate racism and marginalization of Indigenous Peoples; and (2) articulating and centering alternative knowledge

and practices that reflect Indigenous beliefs and lived experiences (Tusasiirwe, 2022). This second dimension aligns with Indigenization; however, we conceptualize Indigenization as a distinct, though related, process that centers Indigenous knowledge systems and sovereignty within institutions. While Indigenization may contribute to decolonization, it also extends beyond it by involving the active resurgence and embedding of Indigenous worldviews in practice.

Reconciliation is defined as “addressing past wrongs done to Indigenous Peoples, making amends, and improving relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people to create a better future for all” (Cull et al., 2018, p. 11). As a reconciliatory effort, Indigenization addresses the harms of colonialism and supports Indigenous self-determination (Morton Ninomiya et al., 2020). Reconciliation requires power-sharing and transformation of decision-making processes (Gaudry & Lorenz, 2018). It also involves relationship-building and working toward a shared future (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015), without placing the burden of change solely on Indigenous Peoples (Gaudry & Lorenz, 2018).

Indigenization incorporates decolonization by challenging Eurocentric approaches “rooted in colonial, apartheid, and Western worldviews and epistemological traditions” (Heleta, 2016, p. 1) that reinforce Western dominance and privilege. It aims to move beyond tokenistic gestures, such as simply increasing Indigenous representation, toward meaningful structural change. This includes supporting Indigenous leadership within organizations to advocate for and implement systemic reforms (Gaudry & Lorenz, 2018; Tusasiirwe, 2022). Ultimately, Indigenization must move past the “performativity of allyship” toward the redistribution of power and resources (Ansloos et al., 2021, p. 100, as cited in Debassige et al., 2022).

### **Challenges to Indigenization**

Although the importance of Indigenization is increasingly acknowledged across Canada, some critical realities and obstacles make the undertaking of Indigenization challenging (Findlay et al., 2023; Wright et al., 2022). For instance, entrenched non-Indigenous political elites and power structures may resist Indigenization efforts as they fear resulting change and the potential loss of status quo benefits. This fear could be borne from a lack of familiarity with Indigenous knowledge systems, leading to the undervaluing of and limited drive to incorporate Indigenous initiatives into existing systems. For example, the lack of understanding of Indigenous health systems and conceptual clarity of terminologies used by Indigenous Peoples can affect support for health indicators and measurement tools in the Canadian healthcare system (Smylie et al., 2012, as cited in Smylie & Firestone, 2015).

Political will and commitment from government leaders are vital to Indigenization efforts and the right to self-determination and self-government of Indigenous Peoples. Smylie and Firestone (2015) noted that “the Constitution entrenches a governmental ‘duty to consult’ Indigenous Peoples prior to enacting any legislation, regulation or potential infringement upon established or potential Indigenous rights and to make appropriate accommodations” (p. 6). Recognition of Indigenous Peoples’ rights over economic, judicial, educational, and health systems can help create the necessary space and support for Indigenous knowledge and approaches to be incorporated into existing Canadian systems. Strategic collaborations and partnerships, which include Indigenous and non-Indigenous individuals, communities, and institutions, can help create shared understanding which is vital in building support for Indigenization initiatives.

### **The Time for Indigenization**

The Government of Canada recognizes the urgent need to acknowledge historical

injustices, heal the long-troubled relationship, and advance reconciliation (Kyoon-Achan et al., 2021). In doing so, it has committed to improving the welfare of Indigenous Peoples, regardless of where they live, to create a more inclusive and equitable society (Employment and Social Development Canada, 2018). The recommendations for a formal approach to Indigenize Canadian society are outlined in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) of Canada final report released in 2015 with 94 Calls to Action (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015). The exact nature, however, of the Indigenization process in practice is still open to debate (Gaudry & Lorenz, 2018; Yan & Cheung, 2006).

Indigenization will require significant changes in systems with the goal of improving health and social outcomes for Indigenous Peoples (Foster-Fishman et al., 2007). In these systems-change efforts, structures and supporting mechanisms, such as policies, relationships, and care values, will need to be intentionally altered to “realign the form and function of a targeted system” to work toward Indigenization (Foster-Fishman et al., 2007, p. 197). EPE defined poverty as the condition in which people “lack, or are denied, economic, social, and cultural resources they need to have a quality of life that ensures full and meaningful participation in the community” (EndPovertyEdmonton, 2016, p. 20). From this perspective, Indigenization is not a programmatic intervention but a systems-level approach that seeks to transform the underlying conditions that produce and sustain poverty. As such, Indigenization is understood as a pathway toward reducing poverty at its roots.

Ending poverty frequently emphasizes the development of additional programs and charities without adequately recognizing the complex and multifaceted nature of poverty (material, social, spiritual, and cultural) experienced by Indigenous Peoples (Thistle & Smylie, 2020). According to the Federation of Canadian Municipalities (2017), eliminating poverty

requires “sustained collaboration with all orders of government, Indigenous organizations, Canadians with lived experience, community organizations and businesses” (p. 9), and the municipal-level organizations and governments play a vital role in “identifying and implementing local actions aimed at poverty reduction” (p. 10). As Cabaj & Weaver (2016) noted, we can use strategic learning in systems change as one controllable aspect of an inherently complex process. In this context, EPE, particularly the Indigenization game changer, posed the following research question: What are the necessary support conditions for successful implementation of Indigenization processes aimed at fostering systems change to eliminate poverty?

## **Methodology**

### **Conducting Research with Indigenous Peoples**

Western research has made progress in decolonizing the research process through Indigenous-led and partnered research with Indigenous individuals and communities, alongside shifting epistemology regarding what constitutes scientific knowledge in specific contexts (Simonds & Christopher, 2013; Wilson, 2001). In essence, the process of decolonization seeks to re-center Indigenous Peoples’ voices and perspectives via research methods, such as conversations and sharing circles, and by involving Indigenous Peoples leading at every stage of the research process—from design to data collection and reporting (Glauser, 2020; Knoop et al., 2024; Morton Ninomiya et al., 2020).

Indigenous-led and partnered research is recognized as an important and valuable component in advancing the self-determination of Indigenous Peoples in Canada (Morton Ninomiya et al., 2020; Murphy et al., 2021). Put simply, research that involves Indigenous Peoples should be led by Indigenous Peoples, including Ceremonial Keepers and community

leaders, and must uphold the principles of Indigenous intellectual sovereignty (Debassige et al., 2022; Knoop et al., 2024).

While four of the five authors are non-Indigenous, the Indigenous Circle (IC) contributed to defining key priorities, reviewing and refining emerging interpretations, and ensuring that findings were aligned with Indigenous perspectives and community priorities. Throughout the research process, we remained attentive to power dynamics inherent in a predominantly non-Indigenous academic team and took steps to support relational accountability. This included iterative engagement with Indigenous partners during analysis and writing, incorporation of feedback that informed the framing of findings, and a commitment to representing the work in ways that reflect Indigenous leadership and intent. As such, we conceptualize this work not as Indigenous-led research in a strict sense, but as research conducted in support of and in partnership with Indigenous-led initiatives.

### **Community-Based Participatory Research**

This research was conducted in partnership with Indigenous leadership, including members of the IC, who played a central role in shaping the direction, interpretation, and representation of the work while focusing on relationships, partnerships, and ceremonies. Knowledge was co-created through collaboration between the Indigenization Directors, team, and CUP researchers, with joint decision-making and accountability to relationships throughout. EPE approached Indigenization not as a symbolic or add-on activity, but as a systems change strategy grounded in Indigenous leadership, relationships, and ways of knowing. We recognize that Indigenization is not a singular or universally defined concept and may be understood differently across First Nations, Métis, and Inuit contexts. Rather than advancing a generalized definition, our work focused on how Indigenization was understood

and enacted within the specific context of EPE, reflecting local relationships, priorities, and practices. Knoop et al. (2024) noted:

The Indigenization strategy is guided by the Indigenous Circle at EPE and implemented by the Directors of Indigenization. The Indigenous Circle is a group of Indigenous Peoples whose work is centred on Indigenous ways of knowing and doing. The Indigenous Circle comes together to influence and inform the work of EPE. The Indigenization strategy forefronts anti-racism, economic reconciliation, policy advocacy, partnership, relationship building, and educating where there exists, ignorance around Indigenous ways of knowing and being. (pp. 6–7)

The research process was designed to be flexible, allowing for adjustments to work plans, incorporation of new data collection and analysis methods, and sustained focus on fostering relationships throughout. The methodology, design, and data collection strategies were guided by three principles: (1) honour for the lived experiences of Indigenous Peoples—First Nations, Inuit, and Métis (Government of Canada, 2023)—with the “nothing about us without us” principle; (2) adherence to OCAP® (Ownership, Control, Access, Possession) principles for data sovereignty (First Nations Information Governance Centre, 2014; Mashford-Pringle & Pavagadhi, 2020), while recognizing that OCAP® specifically applies to First Nations, and that Inuit and Métis communities have distinct data governance frameworks reflecting their own rights and worldviews; and (3) a strengths-based approach that focuses on the assets of individuals and communities, and promotes Indigenization.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

We employed a qualitative methodology for data collection and analysis, with learning occurring through active engagement and relationship-building with the IC and the Directors of Indigenization at EPE. The CUP researchers drafted ideas for the research plan, data collection, and analysis, while the IC gave iterative and final approvals. Between August 2022 and May 2023, the research plan underwent a process of development and revision, incorporating

feedback from the Directors of Indigenization and the IC, who ultimately provided final approval in May 2023.

Participants in this study were EPE staff and leadership, the IC, Elders, the Stewardship Roundtable (EPE's advisory board), and representatives from partner organizations. Qualitative methods, including interviews, focus groups, qualitative surveys, conversations, and sharing circles, were used to generate data. Sharing circles and conversations are particularly significant in Indigenous research, as they create space for storytelling, relational exchange, and collective reflection.

A total of 32 individuals participated in this study between April and August 2023. Data were generated through multiple qualitative approaches, including open-ended surveys exploring participants' reconciliation journeys ( $n = 24$ ), individual conversations ( $n = 4$ ), sharing circles (two circles with five participants each), one-on-one interviews ( $n = 14$ ), and focus groups (two groups with up to seven participants each). Some participants engaged in more than one data collection activity. Among open-ended survey respondents, 25% ( $n = 6$ ) identified as Indigenous, reflecting their representation within the overall participant group. In addition, 17 expert documents provided by the Indigenization team were reviewed.

Data were analyzed using qualitative content analysis (Mayan, 2023), with coding conducted inductively in close collaboration with the Indigenous lead. Emerging findings were regularly co-presented to the Indigenous Circle (IC), where feedback was provided and used to iteratively refine the analysis. Feedback from the IC informed ongoing refinement of categories, with analysis proceeding in cycles guided by Indigenous leadership and priorities. The research process incorporated ongoing reflexive practice and relational accountability and proceeded at a pace guided by the IC. The research team met bi-weekly with the Indigenous

lead and broader team to engage in collective reflection, critically examining assumptions and decision-making processes. These reflexive discussions informed both analysis and interpretation.

The project received ethical approval from the University of Alberta's Research Ethics Board under Pro00125353. OCAP® principles (First Nations Information Governance Centre, 2014) were discussed with the Indigenous Roundtable and coordinators involved in Indigenization efforts to guide decisions related to data governance. It was collectively agreed that the CUP at the University of Alberta would store the data. Access to and future use of the data are governed through ongoing relational agreements between EPE and the university, ensuring that data use remains aligned with the intentions and expectations of Indigenous partners. See Knoop et al. (2024) for additional details on the methodology.

## **Results**

For implementation of Indigenization processes as poverty elimination strategies, the following support conditions are necessary: (1) build reciprocal relationships; (2) nurture collective voices for advocacy; (3) create space for reflection and learning; and (4) allow time for adaptive and incremental change. These categories underscore different aspects of how Indigenization processes can facilitate systems change within the context of poverty elimination, emphasizing the importance of relational, collaborative, and reflective practices for meaningful transformation of and within systems.

### **Build Reciprocal Relationships**

Building reciprocal relationships emerged as a support condition for driving systems change. Participants consistently emphasized that reciprocal relationships promote better

communication, trust, and a deeper understanding of underlying systemic issues. As one member of the IC stated, “Strategic priorities should be rooted in strong, reciprocal relationships among members of the Indigenous community, allies, and partners.” This requires dedicated resources—including human, time, and monetary—towards community engagement and relationship-building with the relevant individuals, organizations, and government bodies. Systems change toward poverty elimination is most effectively achieved when it is rooted in principles of trust, reciprocity, abundant sharing of information and resources, transparency, and mutual respect between Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities, allies, and partners. As one member of the IC explained:

You kind of accept the systems wherever they're at. And you build that relationship, and you try to maneuver it in different ways. And find a way to give inputs that they're comfortable with, while you're building that relationship. You introduce something, and you build their education while you're building your relationship, and you're supplying them with information while you're building that relationship. So, I think that's kind of, that's the process I use. I just kind of watch, observe, see where they're at, see who has the influence and power, start building on that relationship, and then just see where they're at. (Sharing Circle)

Building solid community connections embedded in meaningful relationships is crucial for efforts towards advocacy for and reconciliation with Indigenous Peoples and play a key role in promoting systems change. A member of the IC noted that:

I see partnerships and relationships as a way of providing people with another perspective and affect change. So that's how I see the importance of it. We can't and we shouldn't do it on our own [as Indigenous Peoples]. (Indigenous Sharing Circle)

### **Nurture Collective Voices for Advocacy**

The participants in the study viewed Indigenous allies as people whose collective action hold power when advocating for the rights to self-determination and self-governance by and for Indigenous Peoples. As one of the members of the IC stated:

Where I've seen some powerful changes was when Indigenous Peoples collectively got

together as a group, with some powerhouses in there, too. And said, this is an issue we need to change. Right. So, Indigenization is us coming up with the resolution. (Sharing Circle)

The convergence of diverse groups to advocate for a common cause results from intentional effort and time dedicated to identifying policies and institutions that do not reflect Indigenous values and then seeking reform of those systems. In this context, participants described the importance of identifying possible channels for advocacy and encouraging people to come together in support of the shared issues. The power, cohesion, and efficacy of initiatives to eliminate structural injustices are increased when collective voices are fostered for advocacy, guaranteeing a more substantial and well-coordinated impact.

### **Create Space for Reflection and Learning**

The third support condition needed for Indigenization processes to occur is to create spaces that facilitate reflection and learning. As one of the participants noted:

People don't understand how historically embedded these things are [that is, the Indian Act, anti- Indigenous racism]. You can't change systems without that education, that understanding as to how that system became, right? So, you know, without all that knowledge it's not possible. (Indigenous Sharing Circle)

It can be difficult and upsetting to have conversations about racism and structural issues that Indigenous Peoples confront in their everyday lives. Nonetheless, opportunities where non-Indigenous people can self-reflect or learn more about the Indigenous ways of knowing, doing, and being can help the former expand their knowledge. In addition to building reciprocal relationships, participants described that for advocacy to occur, continual learning about the issues facing Indigenous Peoples through discussions with Elders and Knowledge Keepers is necessary. In these spaces, they can learn more about history and the current challenges, which can prevent performative allyship. Furthermore, the knowledge gained can assist non-

Indigenous individuals in their efforts to successfully navigate the process of incorporating Indigenous viewpoints into their work and activities. For example, one of the EPE staff members commented:

The Directors of Indigenization, like they're a Game Changer. They're trying to do incredible work in the community. So, it's amazing that [name] is able to do these weekly teachings with us and [name] is able to bring up these contemporary issues and supports with the approval of policies and being like support for me and all my questions about Indigenization. (Staff Interview)

Another EPE staff member described how the insights have shaped their approach to engaging with individuals who hold differing perspectives:

If you want to change people's mind, you need to, like actually do things differently, not just tell people what they need to do differently. Right. And so, I actually started bringing that concept to meetings, instead of saying, "Well, I think you should do this, and I think you should do that." I'd be like, "Can I share? Can I tell you a little story?" I say, "I'd like to share an experience I think we might be able to pull from that would be relevant here." Because then it provided more context and gave them a chance to like, come on the journey with me, which like I know, changed me even though it was just like two teachings. (Staff Interview)

Finally, one participant reflected on how the teachings provided by the Indigenization directors have shaped their strategic thinking:

I think the way we think about [ending poverty] and the current systems, we can see that they are clearly not working. I've been really interested in learning the teachings because I'm trying to think about things like, seven generations thinking. How do we have an impact on the next seven generations? And how does this fit into how we structure our organization and our work? Indigenization is a way to inform our future systems. (Staff Interview)

Expanding the knowledge of Indigenous ways of knowing, being, and doing holds the potential to strengthen the ability of allies to advocate for the inclusion of Indigenous values and solutions across and within systems.

### **Allow Time for Adaptive and Incremental Change**

Another key support condition for Indigenization processes to occur illustrates the need

for sufficient time to make substantial progress toward systems change. Adequate time allows for community engagement to determine priorities, enable trust and relationship building, as well as community feedback on strategy. A focus group participant agreed and stated that, “This is a generational change. This is not a one budget cycle change we are trying to create.”

Additionally, it is important to recognize that progress is inherently gradual and cannot be hurried. Another participant pointed out,

So, what I've learned is that incremental progress is still progress. So, even if we, even if it's something as small as incorporating ideas about Indigenous governance within EPE and ensuring that it is working well and it's being acted upon, in a non-lip service manner in a genuine way, that's a win! But larger scale progress is going to take time. (Staff Interview)

Finally, whatever strategy is adopted must remain flexible to evolving needs and contexts. For example, changes to human and time resources could affect the implementation of Indigenization processes. Moreover, increased knowledge about Indigenization and decolonization can help efforts become more focused. Another participant stated,

I'm finding that the whole concept of Indigenization within a poverty elimination strategy or in EPE, that's... that evolves, you know? It almost changes from month to month and it's like, “Oh, okay, we should be working here and doing more in this space because there is an opportunity here,” or like, “How do we do that?” (Staff Interview)

Overall, implementing Indigenization within an organization and as a systems-change strategy is a process that is both time-sensitive as well as time-intensive.

## Discussion

The purpose of the study was to highlight the support conditions for successful implementation of Indigenization aimed at fostering systems change to end poverty using data collected from research conducted with a municipal-level nonprofit. The findings described four key conditions, beginning with the significance of a relational approach to systems change

efforts. This resonates with the literature on Indigenization, decolonization, and reconciliation, which emphasizes the value of meaningful relationships in Indigenous perspectives (Glubke, 2019).

Collaborative efforts are heralded as vital to addressing deeply ingrained barriers that exist within policies and institutions (Bennett et al., 2018; Robinson, 2023; Ryan & Ivelja, 2023). For example, meaningful relationships are required for reconciling Indigenous Peoples' access to land and water (Diver et al., 2019). As noted in Robinson (2023), "... Indigenous resurgence can only be accomplished when we begin to put our relationships first" (p. i). Reciprocal relationships that put Indigenous and non-Indigenous Peoples as equal contributors promote significant opportunities for Indigenization, which is a precursor for advancing truth and reconciliation (Kirkness & Barnhardt, 1991). Efforts grounded in reciprocity are needed to advance systems change and avoid pitfalls that are common in actions toward truth and reconciliation.

The next support condition underscored the need to nurture collective voices for advocacy. Bruno et al. (2025) reported that a feature of allyship, in their participants' perspectives, was the key role of advocacy whereby "all allies had to be advocates for Indigenous people and motivate and inspire other healthcare providers to also stand up against discrimination" (p. 5). Furthermore, advocacy plays a major role in driving systems change and is largely effective when voices are united. Addressing historical injustices and dismantling structural barriers are not achieved through single actions or individual efforts; rather, they require collective understanding and shared responsibility among communities.

As Milligan et al. (2022) write, "Sometimes we lose sight of a simple truth about systems: They are made up of people.... Relationships are the essence and fabric of collective

impact” (para. 1). Unified advocacy voices are impactful for addressing complex issues, which require multi-faceted and sectoral approaches to address those issues. Such unified voices are fundamental to generating public trust (Thorne, 2018). For example, having a collective voice was a key driver in the work done by the Coalition for Healthier Cities and Communities (CHCC) to promote healthy communities in the United States (Norris & Pittman, 2000). Powerful collective voices can effectively shift established policies and institutions. As articulated by Kania et al. (2021), “more transformative and equitable change happens, however, when we act with community, recognizing and building on the people and power it contains” (p. 14).

As noted in the introductory part of this paper, a lack of knowledge about and respect for Indigenous Peoples and their ways of knowing, doing, and being could hamper allyship, the drive toward Indigenization, and efforts toward truth and reconciliation. Thus, the third precondition identified in this study emphasizes the need for creating safe spaces for education by Indigenous Peoples, and self-reflection and learning on the part of non-Indigenous people. Indigenization is part of a complex effort toward decolonization and reconciliation that requires strong relationships and collective advocacy voices. To ensure such relationships are true in practice, it is important to have protected places and spaces where learning can occur (Ritenburg et al., 2014). These spaces also must allow for power sharing (Robinson, 2023) and cultural humility (McCubbin et al., 2023) that facilitate meaningful participation and a sense of collective belonging (Fitzmaurice, 2011).

Finally, the findings note the need for patience, emphasizing that Indigenization will take time due to the underlying complex and intersecting issues that hold systems in place. It is vital that sufficient time is allowed for adaptive and incremental change given that systems change

rarely occurs dramatically and suddenly. For example, the required changes in policies and institutions that are needed to realize Indigenous self-governance over resources are bound to be slow-paced (Bradford et al., 2017). While colonialism caused dramatic changes over a short period of time (Whyte, 2017), significant shifts in modern institutional policies—particularly those related to deep-seated and institutional practices—will face enduring resistance. At this point, it is important to note that advocates for Indigenization should celebrate progress when and how it occurs. The ability to celebrate progress—even when it occurs incrementally—will be vital for sustaining momentum in the face of resistance and for remaining flexible when navigating complex systems (Heifetz et al., 2009).

### **Conclusion**

As the findings suggest, systems change is not a linear or easily achievable process but one that requires ongoing commitment, collaboration, and a willingness to engage in deep, reflective work. Through the interconnected support conditions, we showcased opportunities for systems-level change that are both rooted in Indigenous values and responsive to the unique challenges and needs of Indigenous individuals and communities. For organizations and communities seeking to implement Indigenization processes, these findings provide invaluable insights into how best to approach and sustain change both within their organizations and in their daily lives.

Ultimately, to be effective in driving systems change, Indigenous and non-Indigenous Peoples need to work collaboratively and that requires a deep understanding of Indigenous Peoples and their experiences, a commitment to building trust, and a recognition of the importance of time in the process of transformation. We conclude by asking a provocative question for reflection: how are Indigenous Peoples' ways of knowing, being, and doing

positioned in systems change efforts across municipalities and provinces in Canada and worldwide? Future research might explore this by starting with synthesizing the literature on Indigenization efforts across Canada.

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