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Indigenous Perspectives on Greening the Economy: How do Indigenous climate leaders from
Turtle Island perceive the green economy?

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1. Introduction

Climate change is seen as one of the greatest threats in the twenty-first century (Cavicchioli et al., 2019; Islam, 2022) and Indigenous Peoples are the most at risk and vulnerable to the rapidly changing climate (Jones, 2019; Lulham et al., 2023; Middleton et al., 2020). Indigenous climate leaders understand the climate crisis is tied to, and symptomatic of, ongoing processes of colonialism, patriarchy, dispossession, and capitalism (Alook & Bidder, 2022; Curley & Lister, 2020; Deranger et al., 2022; Gobby, 2020).

Indigenous Peoples are disproportionately impacted by the climate crisis resulting in many Indigenous communities on the frontline of climate injustice. In Canada for example, temperature rise in the arctic disrupts Inuit communities land and food systems (Buschman, 2022), Canada's Chemical Valley on Aamjiwnaang land causes serious health conditions and destroys the local environment (Gray, 2019), wildfires burn millions of hectares each year and endanger Indigenous communities (Anderson, 2023; Batdorf & McGee, 2023; Mihalus et al., 2024), and these are just a few examples. Furthermore, due to intersections of patriarchy and capitalism Indigenous women, Two-Spirit, and gender diverse people experience particularly severe impacts of the climate crisis (Dennis & Bell, 2021). This vulnerability is notable given Indigenous women and Two-Spirit's traditional role as keepers of specific knowledge and resources for responsible land and water stewardship as well as their present leadership resisting resource extraction (Dennis & Bell, 2021; Native Women's Association of Canada, 2023). Indigenous youth are also particularly vulnerable to the warming climate and environmental degradation as their future opportunities are directly impacted by the decision-making of adults today despite their vocal climate leadership (Waugh-Ékè Éwe et al., 2023). The knowledge passed down by Indigenous elders is viewed as a bridge to our ancestors, making the exchange of knowledge and relationship between elders and youth sacred in Indigenous communities. Indigenous traditions identify children are sacred blessings from the creator, each born with unique gifts, that must be nurtured and allowed to grow in relationship to their lands, waters, and communities. Climate injustice threatens this ability for the future generations to connect with their cultures.

Indigenous Peoples fight back against climate injustice drawing on Traditional Ecological Knowledge and innovative solutions to responsibly steward their land. Indigenous cultures and ways of being, while distinct to individual nations and groups, largely center ideas of reciprocity, sustainability, and respect for land, water, people, and animals (Dennis & Bell, 2021; Deranger et al., 2022; M'sit No'kmaq et al., 2021). These principles are grounded in stories, oftentimes in traditional languages, that promote respect for past, current, and future beings. Indigenous law also draws on traditional ways of being and thus conveys *"particular types of relationships with and responsibilities to each other as peoples, the natural world or environment, ancestors, the*

¹ Alook, Young, and McLay of the Centre for Indigenous Knowledges and Languages from York University claim intellectual property of this paper and reserve the right to publish this paper in a more detailed format at a future date. This version was written on December 18, 2023 for the UNDESA EGM to be held in Boulder, Colorado in January 2024.

spirit world, and future generations” (McGregor, 2018, p. 14). Indigenous Peoples embrace traditional principles, and both teach and hold Traditional Ecologic Knowledges that inform Indigenous strategies and approaches to the climate crisis that are essential for sustainability (Hernandez & Spencer, 2020).

Despite widespread calls for Indigenous inclusion in climate action (Environment and Climate Change Canada, 2020a, 2020b; Laboucan-Massimo et al., 2023), Indigenous communities are routinely excluded from climate policy and decision making (Hunsberger & Awâsis, 2019; Reed et al., 2021). This occurs despite the legal principles established in statutory and common law, referred to as the "duty to consult," requiring Canadian authorities to consult with Indigenous communities before making decisions that might adversely affect their inherent and/or treaty rights outlined in section 35 of the 1982 Constitution Act (Hunsberger & Awâsis, 2019). Additionally, Canada has agreed to uphold the principles of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) which requires nations to actively seek Indigenous people’s consent before implementing policies or actions that may encroach upon Indigenous rights (Pasternak & King, 2019). Widespread exclusion of Indigenous Peoples in climate decision-making has resulted in traditional knowledges being undermined and the continued destruction and extraction from Indigenous lands.

1.1 Our Approach. The Indigenous Climate Leadership and Self-Determined Futures Project, supported by York University’s Vice President of Research and Innovation’s Catalyzing Clusters Grant, applies Indigenous research approaches to understand and support Indigenous climate leadership and governance through an Indigenous feminist and decolonial lens. The project has convened a team of Indigenous climate leaders, hosted small gatherings of Indigenous climate experts in Tkaronto (so-called Toronto, Ontario), and engaged in story work to understand Indigenous experiences at COP 27 through community member interviews. We spoke with 9 Indigenous Climate Leaders at COP27, and 8 Indigenous Climate Leaders in our Tkaronto gatherings, from various Indigenous nations, including Métis Nation, Michif, Tsuut’ina Nation, Dine Nation, Anishinaabe, Garden River, Gunadule, Mikisew Cree First Nation, Nlaka’pamux, and others. This paper draws on the work of this team to expand understanding of Indigenous perspectives on the green economy through the lens of Indigenous feminism and Indigenous ways of knowing.

Indigenous feminism asserts that men, women, Two-Spirit, and all genders have equally valued roles to play in community (Alook & Bidder, 2022). This is distinct from Western notions of patriarchy that assert a hierarchy among genders that oppress conceptions of holistic communities (Green, 2017). Colonialism promotes racial and gendered violence that disrupts teachings from mothers, aunties and grandmothers, leaves Indigenous women especially vulnerable where resource extraction occurs, and sidelines the roles of Indigenous women, Two-Spirit and gender queer climate leadership. Yet, traditional Indigenous knowledges demonstrate the spiritual connection Indigenous women have to water, land and the moon that deeply tie Indigenous women to climate leadership (Dennis & Bell, 2021). The powerful role Indigenous women and Two-Spirit peoples hold in sustaining Mother Earth must be valued. Consequently, we advocate for the inclusion of all Indigenous individuals, irrespective of age, gender, sexuality, abilities, race, class, or the extent of impact from climate crises and capitalist colonialism, in national and international climate policies.

1.2 Research Questions:

1. How do Indigenous climate leaders from Turtle Island perceive the green economy?
2. How do Indigenous principles of just transition inform authentic climate solutions?

2. Colonialism and Climate Change

Indigenous climate leaders throughout our study have reflected on the connection between colonialism and climate change. Through interviews, community members shared the trauma associated with climate injustice for Indigenous peoples. Indigenous Peoples residing on their ancestral lands across Turtle Island face the loss of traditional knowledge as their ability to engage in customary hunting, trapping, harvesting, and farming passed down through generations is inaccessible in the changing climate. One community member shared the sorrow of being unsure if their grandchildren would have access to trees and forests in their community. The imminent loss of land and the associated knowledge due to climate injustice elicits fear and anger within Indigenous communities. In another example a community member discussed the trauma of relocation for Indigenous communities due to fires and floods. This forced displacement has profound and distressing effects, as these people's connection to their land spans generations and their relationships to the land is integral to their narratives and teachings. For some Indigenous communities, relocation due to climate disasters evokes emotions and memories of forced moves linked to residential schooling or state separation of children and families during colonialism. Another community member shared that they worried about their communities having to relocate. Unfortunately, these experiences remain largely unrecognized in state discussions on climate, leaving these communities without essential resources for effective adaptation, mental health, or spiritual support.

These stories demonstrate why climate change cannot be comprehensively understood solely through the lens of Western natural sciences; it necessitates incorporating the rich narratives of those directly experiencing its impacts to fully grasp the scope and consequences. In their paper on Indigenous climate leadership, one author Deborah McGregor writes that Indigenous peoples “*do not experience climate change in siloed ways. But the siloed approach [regarding climate solutions] is what gets funded*” (Deranger et al., 2022, p. 60). The current state of climate finance, with Canadian banks and financial institutions positioning themselves as central figures in addressing the climate crisis sustains existing colonial structures (Sapinski, 2016; Soto-Danesco et al., 2022). Previous research indicates that this approach, often termed "climate capitalism," is supported by extensive networks of policymakers and international climate forums promoting climate financing as the paramount solution to the climate crisis (Sapinski, 2019).

Indigenous People are creating and acting on their own solutions to climate injustice because it is necessary, personal, and out of love for their community. Community members we spoke with at COP 27 discussed their dedication to Indigenizing the UN space in order to build solidarity and community with Indigenous People from around the globe. They shared their understanding that truly combatting climate injustice would entail Indigenous leadership for transformative change would mean moving away from systems of colonialism, patriarchy, and capitalism that have gotten us into this situation. Instead, Indigenous values of reciprocity, sustainability, and only taking what we need, and respect for Mother Earth and all its beings

should lead the way. Through talking to Indigenous climate leaders in this study it is clear that Indigenous Peoples across Turtle Island are guided by these principles in their climate leadership at home and on the global stage². We heard many stories of community members taking climate actions in their home territories, such as: using traditional fire practices to curb disastrous fire effects in their home communities; asserting food sovereignty through sustainable hunting tactics and Buffalo revitalization; teaching Indigenous youth to sustainably steward the land and learn traditional languages to access the generations of knowledge; investigating and using alternative energy sources such as wind and solar; and more. Indigenous Peoples recognize that centering the economy will not save the planet. Indigenous climate leaders call for change that goes beyond the confines of colonial capitalist systems to achieve genuine climate justice.

3. False Solutions

Indigenous exclusion from policymaking has led to what the community oftentimes refers to as “false solutions.” False solutions are climate response mechanisms that are surface-level and only go so far as to make minor corrections without acknowledging the transformation required for climate justice (Indigenous Climate Action, 2021b, 2023). Proposed and prioritized “solutions” such as the carbon pricing or nature-based solutions outlined in the Canadian climate policy, Healthy Environment and Healthy Economy only serve to maintain the status quo and reinforce false solutions as main pillars of the Canadian response to the climate crisis (Environment and Climate Change Canada, 2020a; Indigenous Climate Action, 2021b). These mechanisms for a green economy are not a substitute for the rapid phase out of fossil fuels and must be regulated so that nature-based solutions do not lead to greater harm (Indigenous Climate Action, 2021b; IUCN, 2020). Indigenous climate futures depend on the respect, recognition, and exercise of the rights of Indigenous Peoples; their knowledge; and support for holistic approaches to climate solutions. Indigenous Peoples must be recognized as full partners at policy decision-making tables and given support for self-determination in order to survive the climate crisis (Gobby, 2020; Indigenous Climate Action, 2021a; McGregor, 2018).

Indigenous climate leaders at COP 27 told stories of the pattern of surface-level solutions being put forth and prioritized by governments and policy makers. Community members emphasized the need to reject the false solutions in favour of holistic approaches that care for all relations, including humans, animals, plants, water, and Mother Earth. Community members reported that the proposals presented at COP were doomed as they were unwilling to address the cessation of unsustainable practices that have played a role in the ongoing climate crisis. One community member shared a story of her outrage at policy makers lack of commitment to protecting water, which for her underscored the inadequacy in their solutions. She reported, “*it just shows the complete disconnect, even from the world's leaders who are tasked with tackling this challenge that we have, from understanding how the natural world actually works*” (JY).

Another community member emphasized the risk of re-colonization in the shift to a green economy. For example, Indigenous Climate Action has reported on the danger of carbon capture

² Preliminary findings presented at the Indigenous Peoples Pavilion at COP28 in Dubai, United Arab Emirates. Alook, Angele; Lydia Johnson; Adrienne Young; Ana Carolina Almeida Cardoso; and Graeme Reed. December 9, 2023. “Indigenous Climate Leadership: How do Indigenous Peoples Participate in the UN Framework on Climate Change? Stories from COP27”.

on Indigenous lands (2021b). They write, “instead of helping to empower the community economically, these carbon market schemes bring new corporate interests to our territories such as oil and gas, and other polluting industries, who want to invest in projects to ‘offset’ their continued carbon emissions” (Indigenous Climate Action, 2021b, p. 5). This example demonstrates the justified weariness Indigenous climate leaders have about solutions that continue to support the destruction of land and extraction of resources. Community members we spoke with highlighted that solutions that sustain the continued fossil fuel extraction (e.g., carbon pricing, carbon capture, net-zero promises) may divert attention from actual solutions to the climate crisis. One Indigenous climate leader shared the challenge her nation has in securing funding for their climate projects to protect their water as climate financing is diverted to false solutions instead. The underlying issues of overconsumption and misuse of the land alongside the disregard for Indigenous teachings must be dealt with in order for real climate solutions to emerge.

4. Just Transition

Many community members we spoke to in our study emphasized the importance of a just transition within the greening economy in so-called Canada and across the world. While just transition language was born out of labour movements (Mertins-Kirkwood & Deshpande, 2019), a true just transition for Indigenous Peoples should imagine a future built on Indigenous knowledge with transformational shifts in how we think about work and economies. A just transition should be for all, should be led by Indigenous understandings of economies and livelihood and life.

“The End of This World: Climate Justice in So-called Canada” describes two important principles of a just transition; 1) asserting Indigenous sovereignty locally and globally and 2) returning to Indigenous economies of care based on living a good life (known in Cree as *miyopimatisiwin* and in Ojibwe as *mino bimaadiziwin*). One community member we spoke with discussed the importance of just transition in their work in Alberta where family and friends worked for oil companies to feed their families and thrive. They shared that transitioning to a greener economy required not seeing workers in the fossil field industry as villains, but instead understanding their need for work and creating opportunities where workers at all levels of the industry can thrive and be a part of climate solutions. Along similar lines, another Indigenous climate leader wrote that for a just transition we must “think communally and make decisions looking beyond ourselves” (Milton-Lightening, 2020). Unfortunately, current Canadian climate policy does not meet the goals of an Indigenous just transition as exemplified in Bill C-50 *Canadian Sustainable Jobs Act* which narrowly focuses on jobs and dismisses the need for entire communities, municipalities, and provinces to transition (Laboucan-Massimo et al., 2023).

Just transition also means “recognizing the immense economic value of women’s unpaid work, paid care jobs in the public sector like healthcare and human services, and jobs in education that support future generations” (Alook et al., 2023, p. 9). This means that a just, green economy would allow for meaningful work for all members in a community where they also have access to a clean and thriving environment to access a good life (Alook et al., 2023). In one of our Indigenous gatherings in 2023 Indigenous women and Two-Spirit panelists discussed their role as carers in their communities. For one community member, caring for their people meant engaging in climate leadership to call attention to the horrors of the Chemical Valley (an area

outside Sarnia, Ontario on the St. Clair River that is home to 40 percent of Canada's chemical industry) through data collection to build solidarity and resistance. The Cash Back report by the Yellowhead Institute demonstrates other ways that economies of care show up through community-regulated fisheries to responsibly provide traditional foods, community freezers of wild meat, and community-feasts to meet hunger needs and build thriving communities, and finally community-governance of sugar bush camps and salmon harvests to spread the wealth (Pasternak et al., 2021). These Indigenous-led climate solutions must be prioritized alongside *stopping* the flow of financial resources to fossil fuels for a just transition towards sustainable energy economies.

5. Conclusion

Indigenous Peoples have the traditional knowledge, demonstrated experience, and sustainable values to lead the fight against climate injustice. Climate strategies that have been decided and implemented without clear and transparent Indigenous engagement will result in the continuation of harmful systems of colonialism, patriarchy, and capitalism that will hinder efforts for a just transition rooted in Indigenous worldviews. The exclusion of Indigenous peoples from climate policy making at the local, national, and global levels goes against the mandate for free, prior and informed consent as laid out in the United Nations Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP). The UN must abide by their own declaration and elevate Indigenous leadership in global climate negotiations. Member states who support UNDRIP, such as the United States, and those who have signed on, such as Canada, must abide by the right to free, prior and informed consent from Indigenous peoples in cases where their land, cultures and peoples are impacted by unsustainable and dangerous resource extraction, misuse of land, and harmful climate policy that continues to fund fossil fuels.

Furthermore, the Canadian and American governments must stop prioritizing false solutions as these strategies simply promote the capitalist colonialism system that caused the climate crisis in the first place. Climate policy decision-making in the United States and Canada must include Indigenous peoples to achieve a just transition to a green economy. Collectively we need to build an economy based on sustaining the life of all our human and non-human relations, and work towards restoring Indigenous economies of care based in Indigenous principles of sharing, caring, reciprocity, and respect for Mother Earth. Our conversations with community members demonstrate Indigenous climate leadership at local and global levels rooted in Indigenous worldviews – it is these climate strategies that should be prioritized in national climate policy.

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