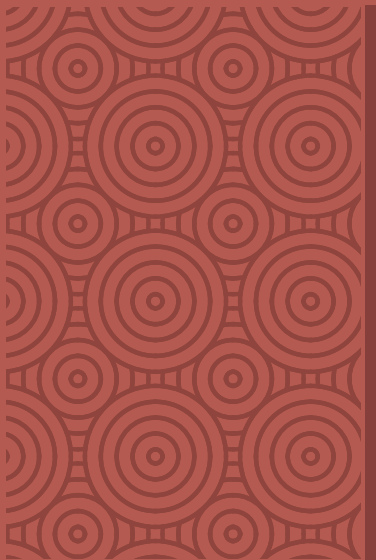


*"We have to change the path
of human beings on this earth"*



Indigenous Peoples, Climate Justice and Action Research in the Americas: Exchanging Knowledges and Building Alliances for Territories of Life

Key Messages
& Lessons Learned

Executive Summary

A retreat co-hosted by the Centre for Indigenous Conservation and Development Alternatives (CICADA), McGill University and the Mohawk Council of Kahnawake (MCK) with the support of the International Development Research Centre of Canada (IDRC)

September 28 - October 2, 2023

McGill University | Canada

Author: Viviane Weitzner, PhD

Acknowledgments: This publication honours the perspectives of the Indigenous leaders who participated in our retreat, and their allies working towards territorial defense and vibrant territories of life. We would like to acknowledge the gift of time and knowledge they gave, the far distances they travelled, and the communities, families and organizations they left behind to engage in this sharing. Defending territories of life and working towards climate justice brings serious threats to many leaders on the frontlines. Our hearts grew heavy hearing about the assassination of Quinto Inuma, Kichwa leader from San Martin, Peru just days after our retreat; and the forced exile of Héctor Jaime Vinasco, Embera Chamí leader of the Resguardo de Origen Colonial Cañamomo Lomaprieta, Colombia due to death threats shortly after our exchange on Kanienkehá:ka Territory. We acknowledge the spiritual guidance of Elder Otsi'tsaken:ra who opened and closed our retreat, and the Leadership and People of Kahnáwa:ke First Nation for hosting us on their sacred, unceded ancestral Territory.

Special thanks to Ratsénhaienhs Cody Diabo, Council Chief, Mohawk Council of Kahnawá:ke, for co-hosting this retreat; Bronwyn Kawenahaw Johns for sharing with us the history of dispossession and resilience of the Kahnienkehá:ka People; and Jordan Diabo and Kimberly Cross at Kahnawá:ke Tourism for organizing a fantastic visit. The crew at Thomson House of McGill University provided a memorable venue for our retreat, with careful attention to detail by Manager Bliss Ward; the welcoming dinner at the Faculty Club was exquisitely curated by Adrian Chu; and Tkahentehtha Beauvais of Berry-Licious Catering sustained us with delicious traditional foods from Kahnawá:ke. Hats off to Raymond Robitaille and the simultaneous translation team for their excellent work; and to Steven Schnoor of CICADA for ensuring the smooth functioning of audio and video throughout the events. Tiva Kawakami, Anna Henry and Ana Araujo Raurau collaborated to produce the beautifully rendered short videos of select participants with guidance from Julian Flavin, Coordinator of L4E's Critical Media Lab. Financial aspects were expertly handled by CICADA Project Managers Aaron Vantsintjan and Lucia Justo, and we are grateful for the extra support received from Deissy Perrilla Daza, L4E Project Coordinator. Dina Spigelski, Assistant Director of L4E, provided invaluable support and advice throughout; and Colin Scott, Director of CICADA and L4E, unwavering backing. This event could not have taken place without the confidence placed in CICADA by the International Development Research Centre's Democratic and Inclusive Governance Team. Special thanks to Team Leader Adrian di Giovanni; and to Markus Gottsbacher and Ana de Oliveira.

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Designed by: Giovanny Aristizabal Hincapié
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i You can access more information on this retreat (agenda, participant's list, breakout session summary reports, presentations, roundtable video with the UN Special Rapporteur on Indigenous Peoples Rights, and short videos featuring select participants), by visiting:
<https://cicada.world/climatejustice/>



Background—Spurring Transformative Change

As our planet burns, floods, and extreme weather events increase, there is growing recognition that solutions to climate catastrophe may be found in holding up the knowledges and ways of life of ancestral peoples whose territories of life are home to 80% of the world's biodiversity. Yet at the same time, global headlines make it increasingly clear that these same territorial stewards are suffering the greatest impacts of extractive development, often risking their lives on the frontlines of territorial defense. Their homelands are filled with the minerals and metals required for new technologies fuelling the 'green energy transition,' resulting in a perverse tension where at once there is a push to conserve these ancestral lands, while also a powerful pull to extract resources for 'clean energy' among others.

In this context, concepts such as climate justice, territories of life and ethical action research have emerged as potential tools to help navigate complex and uncertain times, with a view to upholding Indigenous rights and self-determined outcomes, while bringing about transformative

change. But what do these concepts mean from diverse Indigenous perspectives? How are they analyzed through gendered and intergenerational lenses? And what else needs to be considered to reign in climate catastrophe and safeguard our planet's life systems?

These were among the critical questions examined by participants at a retreat held September 28-October 2, 2023, at McGill University in Montreal that gathered some 50 Indigenous Peoples' representatives and their academic and non-governmental allies from across Turtle Island and Abya Yala. With perspectives from ancestral homelands located in Rapa Nui, Chile, Argentina, Peru, Bolivia, Ecuador, Colombia, Panama, Guatemala, Mexico, the United States and Canada (see Map), the retreat's objective was to exchange knowledges on political, legal and other strategies towards climate justice grounded in Indigenous perspectives; and to identify lessons learned on ethical participatory action research approaches and methodologies, while deepening relationship- and alliance-building.



Retreat delegates from across Turtle Island and Abya Yala.

Key Messages—Implications for Policy, Practice and Action

The two days of workshops (September 30 and October 1) were grounded with a visit to Kahnawá:ke First Nation, and culminated in a hybrid, public forum (October 2) with the UN Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, Francisco Cali Tzay. The conversations were designed collaboratively, honouring ceremony throughout. While we centred on the specific issues of distinct Peoples and their territories of life, some common threads emerged offering critical analysis and policy direction. What follows is a synthesis of select key messages and lessons learned, organized thematically. They offer conceptual and practical implications for policymaking and action by Indigenous Governments, national and international government bodies, non-governmental organizations, academia, philanthropic and donor organizations, and the corporate sector.

Importantly, our discussions benefitted from the perspectives of Afro-Descendant Peoples whose ancestral lands are deeply affected by climate catastrophe, and who have fundamental and collective rights paralleling those of Indigenous Peoples. Except for those relating to the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples and uncontacted Indigenous Peoples, the following key messages and implications should be read inclusively.

Conceptual Implications

1. Climate (in)Justice

Using the term 'Climate Justice' in the context of Indigenous Peoples' territories and experiences may obscure the realities of injustice taking place. While it can remain an aspiration and referent, the term needs to be used cautiously, and even reconsidered. New framings are needed with a view to uniting transformative action towards restoring life-systems.

2. Territories of Life

The concept of Territories of Life offers a guiding principle and framework for individual and collective healing, relationality, sovereignty and transformative change.

Research implications

3. Ethical Research

Ethical research must be co-designed with Indigenous Peoples based on their free, prior and informed consent, resulting in outcomes that benefit and meet the needs and lifeplans of Indigenous Peoples; and that value and give credit to Indigenous scientific knowledge and intellectual property rights, while honouring the role and teachings of ceremony. Autonomous Indigenous research must be encouraged and supported, with donors reducing their bureaucratic requirements to enable direct funding for Indigenous partners; and Indigenous partners strengthening their capacities regarding how to access and administer donor funding.



Participants from Peru and Ecuador share the climate injustices their territories suffer, and the work they are doing to restore territorial integrity and spiritual balance.

Implications for Designing Transformative Pathways

4. Revitalize and Share Indigenous Ways of Knowing, Being and Pedagogy

Revitalizing and valuing Indigenous ways of knowing, being and governance—including Indigenous legal orders and spirituality; and engaging in Indigenous pedagogy towards upholding the guiding principles of respect, reverence, reciprocity, responsibility and relationship, comprise critical tools in transitioning away from the extractivist, capitalist model that has led to our climate crisis.

5. Integrate Women, Youth and Elders

Women, youth and elders have distinct roles in addressing the climate crisis and their voices and knowledges must be incorporated in designing pathways forward, creating enabling conditions for this to happen.

6. Recognize and Value Ancestral Stewardship, Ensure Territorial Legal Security

The current carbon market schemes must be rethought completely: They are hindering—not aiding—land stewardship and conservation and are based on false premises that commodify and put a price on nature, enabling polluters to continue business as usual. There must be an end to top-down conservation models that displace or remove ancestral stewards from their lands and create further legal insecurity for Indigenous title while prioritizing greenwashing the pollution companies are creating elsewhere. Further, the current narrow focus on planting trees and preserving forests needs to be reconsidered, as this can backfire completely should these carbon sinks end up burning and releasing their sequestered carbon. Reversing these top-down, exclusive corporate 'solutions' means considering specific solutions for specific places, where the role of Ancestral Peoples and their scientific knowledge and practices stewarding the forests, the seas and the land are recognized and valued. In these contexts, the ancestral knowledge of Afro-Descendant land stewards must be recognized and valued side-by-side Indigenous Peoples. Ensuring legal security to ancestral lands is urgent.

7. Respect Ancestral Peoples' Rights

Any mining towards 'the green energy transition' must fully respect the rights of Indigenous Peoples outlined in UNDRIP, and the rights of Afro-Descendant Peoples, including their own processes and laws around Free, Prior and Informed Consent. Any projects that follow Indigenous and Afro-Descendant due process and obtain Indigenous and Afro-Descendant Peoples' consent, must lead to partnerships in benefit-sharing, or be fully led by the original land stewards themselves.



Members of Kanahwá:ke's Environmental Protection Office explain to delegates their efforts to restore their territory following the devastating effects of the building of the St. Lawrence Seaway.

8. Combat Illicit Economies

States must take concrete actions to address the growing presence of illicit armed actors in ancestral territories, and the nefarious and violent effects this has on territorial and cultural integrity, fuelling climate crisis. Indigenous and ancestral peoples must continue strengthening their autonomous land stewards and monitors through People-to-People exchanges to share concrete strategies for individual and collective self-protection in these contexts.

9. Protect Uncontacted Peoples, Reverse (in)justice in the Sea

States must pay special attention to protecting uncontacted Indigenous Peoples and those living in voluntary isolation particularly in the context of illicit economies that exacerbate climate crisis; and to cleaning-up the climate injustices taking place around the accumulation of plastics in our planet's seas.

10. Re-design International Processes, Fund Ancestral Peoples Directly

International processes designed to combat the climate crisis must be redesigned so they enable Indigenous Peoples' participation from the grassroots, including women, youth and Elders, and put in place special support mechanisms to enable this participation, particularly for women (childcare, elder care, among others). This design should consider how Indigenous territories in and of themselves—as communities of human and non-human beings—can participate and be heard. Beyond including Indigenous Peoples' intergenerational and gendered participation in these global processes, resources to combat the climate crisis must be redistributed and flow directly to Indigenous Peoples so they can fulfil their unique responsibilities for the benefit of all humankind and life systems.

11. Unite Humankind in Shared Responsibility

To combat the climate crisis effectively, all humankind and peoples must unite. It is a shared responsibility that includes—but goes far beyond—Indigenous Peoples and their ancestral knowledge

Implications for Indigenous Peoples Scaling-Up

12. Scale-up through the UN Special Rapporteur

To scale-up action internationally with the UN Special Rapporteur, Indigenous Peoples need to make petitions directly, and send the relevant information to Francisco Cali Tzay, United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples at his official and personal email addresses: hrc-sr-indigenous@un.org (official); josefcaltzay@arizona.edu (personal).

13. Use and Cite the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP)

For UNDRIP to become entrenched as a universal, binding instrument, Indigenous Peoples must cite and use it as much as possible.

Closing Reflections

Our retreat was designed honouring the teachings and importance of ceremony. Just as it started, it closed in ceremony offered by Elder Otsi'tsaken:ra. His words are a wake-up call for us all to change the path of human beings on this earth:

“Our mother is sick, and our mother is hurting. Our mother is struggling. And just like us, when we get a cold, there's only two things that could happen. One is that our body will fight the cold and we will heal; or two, our body is too weak, and we will die. The earth is the same way. The earth is sick and struggling. And you know who the disease is? It's human beings. So, two things will come of this: either we start to understand our place in this world now; or she will get rid of us. And she has time on her hands...”

Big governments, they think they've got power. They've got guns. They've got their laws, their police, their vehicles. But our prophecies tell us, there will come a time when human beings will be given a lesson. And maybe we need to keep telling the big money people that think they've got all the guns, they've got no power. When the earth will change, their guns won't mean anything. Their money won't mean nothing. So, we need to tell them. We have to change the path of human beings on this earth.”

—Elder Otsi'tsaken:ra, Kahnewá:ke First Nation, Turtle Island (excerpt from closing ceremony)



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