



**GIMIWAN**



A VISION2030 PROGRAM

**Case studies are associated with the Decolonizing ENGO-First Nations Partnerships program and developed by Gimiwan Consulting**

## **Case Study 3: Advancing Decolonization as a National Organization**

November 2025

### **Background**

The case study below focuses on an initiative led by a national ENGO regarding Indigenous-led land care in urban contexts across Canada. The ENGO's key areas of focus include urban parks and green spaces in Canada. Specifically, they champion the importance of access to green spaces for people living in cities and the benefits it has for health, wellbeing, and the environment.

This project was initiated in response to an identified gap in the organization's knowledge: understanding the breadth of Indigenous-led urban land care in Canada. While the organization has existing relationships with groups doing work in this realm, they saw a need to grow their relationships with folks engaged in this work. A repeated challenge this ENGO has come up against is engaging in decolonization as a national organization since a national scope can create barriers to doing place-based work. Accordingly, their organization identified a need to build more relationships with Indigenous-led urban land care groups across the country, which includes investing in the time and resources necessary to build these relationships.

The initiative was two years in length and at the time of the interview, and was approaching its halfway point. There are several components to the project, including working with an Indigenous consultant to better understand the scope of Indigenous-led urban land care in Canada, conducting interviews with initiative leaders and producing case studies, and hosting events on the land to engage people in Indigenous learning and stewardship.

While the project is still ongoing, the interviewee suggested that a factor that will contribute to its success includes the hiring of an Indigenous consultant, particularly to understand best practices for conducting the research and sharing the findings. Additionally, the interviewee indicated that holding strong pre-existing relationships with Indigenous partners will support the project's success since their organization can be vulnerable and ask for guidance in areas they have less knowledge in.

### **Engaging in Decolonial Work as National Organization**

A key challenge that this ENGO has faced when engaging in decolonial work is not being place-based as a national organization. To illustrate this challenge, the interviewee shared a specific example of how it has shown up:

We've had lots of conversations as a cohort about how to connect with Indigenous knowledge keepers. And people are very successful at doing it very locally, but the question always was,

how do you do it nationally? How, as a national organization, do I connect with knowledge keepers and address decolonization in our work when it's not place-based?

This challenge has shown up in the ENGO's experiences applying for funding. In one instance, the organization was applying for a grant that was place-based and had different levels of funding according to how many cities were involved. While the ENGO had pre-existing relationships with groups in some cities, they ended up cold calling some groups to gauge their interest. The interviewee described this experience by stating, "we were in this situation where we were almost cold calling organizations that we'd kind of worked with in the past to say, are you doing stewardship? Are you working with Indigenous partners? Can we put your name down?" The interviewee noted that this approach felt awkward and worried it could have negative outcomes for their relationships: "I worry that 'cold calling' could jeopardize the potential to build deeper, more meaningful relationships [with Indigenous partners] just because you're under pressure to meet a deadline and fulfill grant requirements."

The interviewee also indicated that there have been times where their organization has reached out to groups to include them on a grant application but did not receive the funding, which they expressed can wear the relationship. Their organization recognizes that this approach does not foster strong relationships, and consequently, their current project aims to invest in expanding their relationships, so they are not in a situation where they are cold calling people. According to the interviewee, another reason for growing their relationships is to avoid always asking the same groups to partner with them:

I think, as a lot of organizations do, we have a few Indigenous partners that we're in touch with all the time and probably the same folks that everybody else is in touch with all the time. So we understood that there's a need to expand and build the relationships that we hold.

This point suggests that ENGOs should critically reflect upon how they can avoid placing additional labour on communities in their decolonial work. At times, ENGOs' efforts to decolonize can be burdensome to Indigenous communities, especially when it creates more work for communities and takes them away from working on their own priorities. In this case, expanding relationships could help to alleviate some of the labour placed on groups the organization is in regular contact with.

The interviewee shared that while their organization could have used a recent grant to do work already within their wheelhouse, they decided to use it as an opportunity to try something new and build new relationships. This initiative enables the ENGO to access both the time and financial resources to grow their relationships, which will hopefully address some of the challenges they face doing decolonial work as a national organization.

### **Decolonial Work in Urban Contexts**

Another reason prompting the organization to grow their relationships is that in the urban context, the groups working on land care are not always evident since their work tends not to be widely publicized. The interviewee also shared that land care projects in urban contexts face unique challenges compared to rural contexts. They explained that urban contexts have complicated jurisdictions, making it difficult to engage in land care work. Furthermore, external research has shown that urban contexts are often seen

incorrectly as non-Indigenous spaces, which has led to things like Starlight tours and erasing the fact that cities are built on Indigenous lands.<sup>1</sup>

Moreover, urban groups typically have to seek permission from municipal governments to do work on the land and therefore, have limited decision-making power. These circumstances can create barriers to engaging in decolonial work in urban contexts to the extent that municipal laws limit Indigenous self-determination. Additionally, the interviewee noted that working in the urban context is different because their organization is often working with people who are not the traditional land holders, which can make navigating relationships difficult.

Despite these challenges, when asked about what they want to share with others in the ENGO sector about their initiative, the interviewee stated,

I want other organizations to know that Indigenous stewardship of land in urban areas is happening. It is successful. It is replicable. It doesn't have to be so hard. We work with a lot of municipal governments that can be very risk adverse. So, I think from the actual content of the research, I want people to know that it's happening, it's doable, it's successful and you can do it too.

Additionally, the interviewee suggested that the ENGO sector would benefit from strengthened relationships between those working in urban and rural contexts. While the two contexts are different, the interviewee indicated that collaboration is important given the urban environment is not separate from the rural environment.

## **Learnings**

The interviewee shared several key learnings from their experiences doing decolonial work. Importantly, they indicated that, at times, ENGOs can get stuck in the learning stages of decolonization given there is no end to learning opportunities. Yet, the interviewee expressed that to make progress toward decolonization, ENGOs need to move from learning to taking action:

I also feel you have to be willing to make mistakes, take the criticism, the feedback, put yourself in uncomfortable situations if you're going to actually make progress. We could sit and just keep on learning, there is no end to the amount of learning that you can do, but at a certain point you also have to take action. It might be two steps forward, one step back.

Likewise, our research suggests that in the sector's current landscape, many ENGOs are invested in decolonization-focused learning and training opportunities. However, as the interviewee pointed out, ENGOs can get stuck in the learning stage and it can even become a way to avoid taking action. They sum this point up by stating, "I think you can hide behind the, 'we're still learning things,' which could prevent you from doing things." The interviewee recognized that taking action can be risky, especially when an ENGO's public image or funding are challenged or put into question; however, they suggested that taking risks is necessary in this work. Similarly, the Circle on Philanthropy's 2024 Upwelling Learning Agenda indicates that Indigenous leaders would like to see ENGOs take risks in the ways they show up to

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example: Sherene Razack, *Dying from Improvement: Inquests and Inquiries into Indigenous Deaths in Custody* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2015).

decolonial work.<sup>2</sup> This finding suggests that to commit to decolonization, ENGOs must move from learning to taking action, and engage in work that may at times present risk to their brands and funding.

**Key Takeaways:**

- This case study highlights that implementing decolonization measures as a national ENGO can be challenging considering that a national scope may contradict the place-based nature of decolonial work.
- Key to doing decolonial work generally, and particularly as a national ENGO, is ensuring strong relationships have been built before entering into work.
- The interviewee highlighted previous approaches to partnerships that have not worked, including cold calling Indigenous organizations to determine their interest in being included on a grant application. Additionally, they expressed concern that their organization relies too heavily on the relationships they have built, placing additional labour on these groups.
- Accordingly, the project noted in this case study is led by a national ENGO and aims to expand and deepen its relationships with Indigenous-led groups across Canada, supported by the necessary resources to do so.

Prepared by: Gimiwan Research and Consulting Inc. Lead writer: Caitlin Feeley. Disclaimer: This case study is for educational purposes only and is not legal advice nor tax advice.

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<sup>2</sup> “Upwelling Learning Agenda,” The Circle on Philanthropy, September 2024, 6, [https://the-circle.ca/wp-content/uploads/2024/09/The-Upwelling-LEARNING-AGENDA\\_-\\_September-2024.pdf](https://the-circle.ca/wp-content/uploads/2024/09/The-Upwelling-LEARNING-AGENDA_-_September-2024.pdf).