

Getting from Study to Shovel

Why projects stall and what to do about it

Across the country, Indigenous communities have shelves full of completed studies that never led to action. The project stalled not because the study was bad, but because there was no plan for what to do after it was finished. The gap between study and shovel is where the most promising projects go to die. It is also where the most value can be created.

WHY PROJECTS STALL

Five common patterns

1. The study ends without clear next steps

A recommendation to "proceed to the next phase" without specifying what that involves, who does it, or what it costs.

2. The team that did the study moves on

Consultants leave. Institutional knowledge goes with them. The Nation inherits a document but not the momentum.

3. Governance decisions are not made in time

Who leads the project? What governance structure oversees it? If these questions wait until after the study, decision-making becomes the bottleneck.

4. Different funding is needed for implementation

New applications to different programs with different requirements. The gap between funding cycles can stretch for months or years.

5. Leadership changes or priorities shift

Elections, turnover, or new crises redirect attention. Without institutional structure, even well-planned projects lose momentum.

A systems problem, not a capacity problem

Most feasibility processes are designed to produce a report, not launch a project. The deliverable is the study. It should be a project that is ready to move.

WHAT GOOD STUDIES DELIVER

Beyond the feasibility report

A study designed to launch a project, not just assess one, should deliver more than a viability conclusion.

A clear project definition

Not "solar is feasible" but "a 2 MW installation at this location, connected to this grid point, with this cost and timeline."

A financial model with scenarios

Best case, higher costs, lower revenue, longer timelines. Funders and investors will ask for this.

A 90-day action plan

What happens in the first three months after the study? Who does it? What does it cost? This is the bridge.

A funding pathway

Which programs are appropriate for the next phase, what they require, and when applications are due.

A partnership and procurement strategy

Who is available, what procurement looks like, and how to structure partnerships that serve the Nation.

Community engagement documentation

Every conversation and piece of feedback documented and delivered to the Nation.

Set expectations at the start

Define these deliverables in your terms of reference when hiring consultants. This ensures the study is designed to launch a project, not just produce a report.

THE FIRST 90 DAYS

Maintaining momentum after the study

Weeks 1 to 2: Internal review and decision

Leadership reviews findings and makes a formal, documented decision to proceed. A council resolution gives the project team a clear mandate.

Weeks 3 to 4: Assemble the project team

Identify who leads the implementation phase. Someone must be accountable for moving the project forward.

Weeks 5 to 8: Begin funding applications

Using the funding pathway from the study, start preparing applications. Coordinate across multiple submissions.

Weeks 9 to 12: Engage partners and begin procurement

Start conversations with technical partners early. Procurement takes time. Running it in parallel with funding prevents delays.

READINESS CHECKLIST

Is your project ready to move?

- Feasibility study completed and reviewed by leadership
- Formal decision to proceed documented (council resolution or equivalent)
- Specific project definition with location, scale, cost, and timeline
- Financial model with multiple scenarios completed
- Next 90 days defined with responsible parties
- Funding sources identified with application deadlines
- Project lead or coordinator assigned
- Community engagement results documented
- Governance structures defined
- Technical partners and contractors identified

Working with Unify Partners

We specialize in the space between study and shovel. If you have completed feasibility work and need help building the roadmap to implementation, reach out at unifypartners.ca.