

A Way Forward

Ontario's Path Towards Economic Reconciliation,
Equity and Inclusive Growth

Part IV: Lands and Infrastructure



Introduction

As Canada faces an existential threat to its economy and prosperity, and aspires to build a stronger economy, governments and businesses see exciting opportunities for development. There is welcome acknowledgement of the importance of partnership with Indigenous businesses, nations and communities.

For these partnerships to be meaningful, however, businesses and governments must understand the history, world views and present-day context of Indigenous Peoples and their relationship with the land.

Indigenous Peoples have lived in harmony with the land, rooted in principles of sustainability and stewardship, since time immemorial. However, colonial policies forcibly removed many Indigenous communities from their lands, relocating them to smaller parcels often viewed as less desirable and farther from infrastructure networks and government services.¹ In addition to displacement and restrictions on movement, disrupting traditional economies and ways

of life, the Crown and federal government have often failed to fully honour treaties negotiated with First Nations, supporting non-Indigenous settlement and expansion.²

To this day, as a result of historical and ongoing policies, First Nations communities, particularly those in rural and remote areas, face significant infrastructure gaps with housing, clean water, energy, transportation, and digital connectivity, in comparison to non-Indigenous communities. These conditions continue to limit economic development and community well-being.

As resource-intensive industries increasingly depend on lands located near or within Indigenous territories, consultation with Indigenous Peoples facilitated by governments and corporations for development projects on their lands remains inconsistent. This imbalance puts the communities in a difficult position to weigh potential development benefits against further land, rights, and sovereignty risks.



¹ Ontario Chamber of Commerce, *Sharing Prosperity: An Introduction to Building Relationships for Economic Reconciliation in Ontario*, 2023, p. 20, retrieved from <https://occ.ca/wp-content/uploads/Sharing-Prosperity-An-Introduction-to-Building-Relationships-for-Economic-Reconciliation-in-Ontario.pdf>.

² The Canadian Encyclopedia, *Reserves in Ontario*, retrieved from <https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/reserves-in-ontario>.

Indigenous communities' relationship with land and resources is rooted in traditional subsistence, kinship, and sharing of resources for mutual benefit. However, it is important to recognize that Indigenous Peoples are not a monolith. In fact, many Indigenous communities are deeply engaged in entrepreneurship and economic development to enhance community prosperity, as long as these efforts align with community values and environmental stewardship in accordance with their inherent and treaty rights.

Indigenous Peoples generally seek meaningful consultation and engagement, with the expectation that the federal government will uphold its financial and fiduciary responsibilities delegated by the Crown, in response to broken promises and treaties. Consultation is a legal requirement and, while it can achieve outcomes similar to engagement, it is primarily a delegated process. Engagement, on the other hand, fosters stronger relationships and often leads to better project results. Combining consultation with robust engagement benefits all parties. As nation-building projects evolve and Indigenous self-determination gains broader recognition, governments and businesses should view economic reconciliation as

a pathway to greater certainty, innovation, unity, shared prosperity, and resilience.

Investing in community infrastructure builds the foundational capacity for Indigenous Peoples to lead, manage, and actively participate in broader infrastructure projects across Canada, as well as any other commercial activities they choose to pursue on their lands.

The Assembly of First Nations (AFN) 2023 report, *Closing the Infrastructure Gap*, suggests that addressing infrastructure needs in Indigenous communities could generate \$635 billion in economic output and create nearly 2.4 million jobs over the next seven years, thereby enhancing education, health, productivity, and economic growth across Canada.³⁴

This chapter on Infrastructure and Development in the series, *A Way Forward*, from the Ontario Chamber of Commerce and Canadian Council for Indigenous Business, recognizes the vital role of Indigenous Peoples as partners in creating a more inclusive and sustainable Ontario, while addressing the infrastructure gap that continues to negatively impact First Nation communities.

³ Assembly of First Nations, "AFN and Conference Board of Canada Release Report Highlighting \$63.5 Billion Economic Impact of Closing Infrastructure Gap by 2030," Press Release, 2023, retrieved from <https://afn.ca/all-news/press-releases/assembly-of-first-nations-afn-and-conference-board-of-canada-release-report-highlights-635-billion-economic-impact-of-closing-infrastructure-gap-by-2030>.

⁴ Assembly of First Nations, Benefits for All Canadians: Part 1 – Economic Impact of Closing the Infrastructure Gap, 2023, retrieved from <https://afn.bynder.com/m/6dd56bbd79afa1d3/original/Benefits-for-All-Canadians-Part-1-Economic-Impact-of-Closing-the-Infrastructure-Gap.pdf>.

Traditional Land Use

Many Indigenous communities support resource development when it is ethical, inclusive, aligned with community values, and conducted with respect for rightsholders. **For businesses, this means going beyond consultation to build cultural understanding and respect for traditional land use, which is deeply tied to Indigenous identity, culture, knowledge systems, and spiritual relationships with land and water.**

In Indigenous cultures, land and water are not just resources; they are sacred relatives central to cultural continuity and community well-being. These elements are alive with spirit, memory, and purpose, holding stories and traditions that have been inherited over countless generations. As a result, sacred sites, burial grounds, and harvesting lands must be protected, as disruption to these areas can lead to food insecurity, loss of Traditional Knowledge, and long-term harm to cultural practices.

Practices such as hunting, fishing, trapping, and gathering medicine are governed by principles of reciprocity and sustainability. Animals and fish are taken only as needed during certain times of the year through ceremony and prayer, accompanied by offerings of respect and gratitude. Large harvests are often shared and processed by the entire community. This honours the spirit of the harvest and interconnectedness of all life. **Development that disregards these cycles risks food insecurity, severing vital connections to land and community, and limiting access to traditional medicines.**

When development projects proceed without meaningful consultation and respect for Indigenous rights, they endanger the lifeways that Indigenous Peoples have relied on for centuries. By adopting the Seventh Generation Principle — a foundational concept most commonly associated with the Haudenosaunee while also informing broader Indigenous worldviews — businesses must acknowledge a sacred responsibility to protect the land and water for the next seven generations.

Economic development and infrastructure must support, not replace, traditional ways of life. **By investing in respectful and meaningful partnerships and sustainable infrastructure, businesses can support Indigenous communities to thrive in the modern economy while preserving cultural continuity.**



Bridging the Infrastructure Gap

Indigenous communities face disparate access to essential facilities and services that many Canadians often take for granted. These services — including housing, clean water, roads, internet, schools, and healthcare — are the building blocks of any functioning society, according to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). This ongoing infrastructure gap within Indigenous communities is rooted in generational inequality, racism, and discrimination stemming from colonialism.

“

Aligning the SDG's with Indigenous goals can unlock resources and new ways of thinking about long-standing challenges.”

- Jennifer Ashawasegai-Pereira, Senior Indigenous Engagement Specialist, AtkinsRéalis

Without adequate physical and digital infrastructure, business attraction is limited, barriers to education and employment increase, health and safety risks emerge, market access for entrepreneurs is reduced, the cost of basic services rises, and social isolation intensifies. These are prerequisites for unlocking economic growth and becoming equal partners at the table in procurement and partnership opportunities.

In February 2024, former Minister of Indigenous Services Patty Hadju hosted the first Economic Reconciliation Roundtable discussion, bringing together Indigenous leaders from national Indigenous organizations and economic institutes, senior executives from Canada's financial sector, federal ministers, and senior federal officials.

Participants identified the infrastructure gap as one of the primary barriers to economic development in Indigenous communities. The roundtable emphasized the need to expand financial services to support a diverse range of commercial activities, build roads to connect isolated communities, and develop fundraising mechanisms for community infrastructure that place greater control in the hands of Indigenous Peoples.⁵ **Together, these priorities offer numerous avenues for businesses of all sizes to partner on capacity-building projects, co-develop local solutions, and co-invest in Indigenous-led funds that align with reconciliation and sustainable investing, all while taking a strategic role in addressing the infrastructure gap.**

A report by the Assembly of First Nations (AFN) estimates that a \$349 billion in capital and operating investment is needed to close this gap by 2030. This total includes \$49 billion in capital investments for Ontario to upgrade physical infrastructure, such as housing, schools, water systems, roads, and digital connectivity, as well as \$10 billion in operational and maintenance funding to ensure that infrastructure remains safe and effective over time.⁶ To address such a large infrastructure deficit it must be recognized that this will require time, effective resources, and collaboration between all levels of government and private sector entities. This will ensure the economic payoff meets the needs of communities with mutual benefit for industries across the nation.

⁵ Government of Canada, Economic Reconciliation Roundtable I: What We Heard, Indigenous Services Canada, last modified 2024, retrieved from <https://www.sac-isc.gc.ca/eng/1712932096213/1712932133185#sec2-6>.

⁶ Assembly of First Nations, Benefits for All Canadians: Part 1 – Economic Impact of Closing the Infrastructure Gap, 2023, retrieved from <https://afn.bynder.com/m/6dd56bbd79afa1d3/original/Benefits-for-All-Canadians-Part-1-Economic-Impact-of-Closing-the-Infrastructure-Gap.pdf>.

Approximately \$59 billion is required across the 139 First Nations communities in Ontario. Investment is especially urgent in remote or fly-in communities (also known as Zone 4 communities), which are situated relatively far from major population centres and service hubs, and therefore face greater challenges in accessing essential infrastructure.

In Budget 2025, the federal government has announced \$2.3 billion over three years for safe water in First Nations, \$10.1 million over three years for Indigenous consultations on major projects, and communities are eligible to access funding through the new Build Communities Strong Fund, which totals \$51 billion over 10 years. However, further investments are needed to close the growing infrastructure gap as highlighted in budget requests submitted by the Assembly of First Nations (AFN), Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami (ITK) and Métis National Council.^{7,8}

Additionally, infrastructure challenges tend to worsen with distance from urban centres. While 15 per cent of urban Indigenous populations report poor infrastructure, this figure rises to 25 per cent in remote, fly-in communities, with an overall rate of 18 per cent.⁹

The natural resources that have powered Canada's growth through nation-building projects are often located on Indigenous lands. Yet, the benefits have not always been equitably shared. A recent RBC analysis shows that 73 per cent of resource and energy projects across Canada intersect with Indigenous communities, representing \$98 billion in potential Indigenous economic opportunities over the next decade.¹⁰ In Ontario, the mining industry alone generates more than \$10 billion in annual mineral production.¹¹

Despite the wealth generated from these lands, investment in Indigenous infrastructure has been inconsistent and insufficient. Moreover, revenues generated from the sale, use, or interest in First Nations lands and resources under the *Indian Act* are held in a public trust and managed by the federal government,¹² which often prioritizes its own goals, including public infrastructure that benefits the wider Canadian population. This system challenges the common stereotype that Indigenous communities are largely subsidized by non-Indigenous Canadians, hindering the country's broader economic priorities.

For Ontario's business community, this means engaging with Indigenous communities as equal partners, expanding access to Indigenous customers, talent, and resources; unlocking local procurement opportunities; and fostering innovation through collaboration. Building meaningful relationships rooted in respect for Indigenous rights and traditional relationships with the land is essential for shared prosperity.

True partnerships require that all parties have an equal voice in decision-making. Consent ensures that Indigenous communities actively shape the projects that affect them. For example, Ontario's economic plans, such as developing the Ring of Fire or other resource-rich sites, must be done with input and agreement from First Nations communities to ensure that these plans are not imposed, but instead support the communities' own economic visions for the future and respect their responsibility and relationship to the land.

⁷ Brett Forester, "Indigenous Programs Face \$2.3B in Cuts, Some New Money in Carney's 1st Budget," CBC News, November 4, 2025, retrieved from <https://www.cbc.ca/news/indigenous/indigenous-budget-2025-9.6966648>.

⁸ Joy SpearChief-Morris, "Indigenous Leaders Skeptical Federal Budget Will Deliver on 2030 Infrastructure Promise," CBC News, November 6, 2025, retrieved from <https://www.cbc.ca/news/indigenous/federal-budget-indigenous-infrastructure-9.6948675>.

⁹ Government of Canada, Evaluation of the Other Community Infrastructure and Activities Program, Indigenous Services Canada, last modified on September 15, 2025, retrieved from <https://www.isc.gc.ca/eng/1722515985383/1722516130449>.

¹⁰ RBC Thought Leadership, "Building Together: How Indigenous Economic Reconciliation Can Fuel Canada's Resurgence," RBC, retrieved from <https://www.rbc.com/en/thought-leadership/indigenous/building-together-how-indigenous-economic-reconciliation-can-fuel-canadas-resurgence/>.

¹¹ Government of Ontario, Ontario's Critical Minerals Strategy 2022–2027: Unlocking Potential to Drive Economic Recovery and Prosperity, retrieved from <https://www.ontario.ca/page/ontarios-critical-minerals-strategy-2022-2027-unlocking-potential-drive-economic-recovery-prosperity>.

¹² Government of Canada, Trust moneys, Treaty annuities, estates and trusts, Indigenous Services Canada, last modified September 26, 2025, retrieved from <https://sac-isc.gc.ca/eng/1428673130728/1581870217607>.

For businesses seeking to complement these efforts, a path to cooperative and meaningful development begins with considering how their unique capacities and expertise can contribute to mutually beneficial arrangements with Indigenous communities.

While corporate initiatives are important, they must complement, rather than replace, government responsibilities. Canada has made public commitments to uphold its legal and fiduciary obligations, including ensuring Indigenous communities have access to services and infrastructure comparable to those available elsewhere. While progress has been made, many commitments remain works in progress.

Ongoing efforts must be grounded in Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC), as advocated by the United Nations in support of Indigenous Peoples' rights to determine how their lands are used or developed. **Government and business must go further by supporting Indigenous-led priorities as opportunities for mutual benefit. This includes recognizing the role of small businesses, whose contributions, such as job creation, training, and community engagement, often go overlooked but can have immediate and lasting impact.**

When governments, businesses and communities work together, there is a real opportunity to close the infrastructure gap, promote Indigenous self-determination, create opportunities for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous businesses, and ensure investors enjoy strong, sustainable long-term returns.



Key Infrastructure Challenges Requiring Whole-of-Society Action

Disparities for Rural and Remote Indigenous Communities

A 2019 report by the Centre for the Study of Living Standards assessed infrastructure levels in 236 remote northern communities across Canada, comparing Indigenous communities with non-Indigenous communities in both northern and southern regions across 13 infrastructure indicators. The report found that major cities in Canada had an overall infrastructure index nearly double that of Indigenous communities. Remote non-Indigenous communities also had significantly higher infrastructure levels than Indigenous communities. Among the

infrastructure types analyzed, the most significant gap for First Nations and Métis groups was in housing.

As former Ontario Regional Chief Glen Hare stated in 2024, “In Ontario alone, it will cost \$58.9 billion to ensure on-reserve infrastructure in First Nations in Ontario is on par with the rest of the province by 2030 — a gap that is among the widest in the country.” These infrastructure gaps must be addressed by engaging all sectors and levels of society in alignment with the principles of Indigenous self-determination and autonomy.

Challenge: Limited Access to Clean Drinking Water

There is an urgent need for well-maintained, properly monitored, and fully functioning water infrastructure for impacted communities, as its absence can have life-threatening consequences. Beyond the health impacts, living without access to safe water also directly affects infrastructure readiness and limits the ability to meaningfully engage in employment and business partnerships, making such opportunities a non-starter without a clear commitment to addressing this unmet need.

Water security varies by community, as each faces distinct challenges, including pollution, limited resources, aging infrastructure, and a shortage of trained personnel for the water system. As of May 2025, 38 water advisories were in effect in 36 communities, with many First Nations communities lacking sufficient water pressure.

Budget 2025 proposes to provide \$2.3 billion over three years, starting in 2026-27, to renew the First Nations Water and Wastewater Enhanced Program. This funding will maintain progress on approximately 800 active projects, including those focused on ending remaining water advisories and preventing new ones by upgrading at-risk systems.¹³

There are several ways that businesses can support Indigenous water security. These include collaborations with Indigenous governments and engineering firms to co-develop and finance water treatment facilities, distribution systems, and wastewater upgrades; prioritize investments in modular and scalable technologies suited for remote and fly-in communities (especially in Zone 4 communities); support investments in low-energy filtration systems and solar-powered pumps, especially in communities with aging infrastructure; and advocate for the expansion of workforce development and certification or training pathways in water system maintenance through apprenticeships.

¹³ Borden Ladner Gervais LLP, Federal Budget 2025: Energy, Infrastructure, and Indigenous Funding Initiatives, November 11, 2025, retrieved from <https://www.blg.com/en/insights/2025/11/federal-budget-2025-energy-infrastructure-and-indigenous-funding-initiatives>

Case Study: Ending Long-Term Water Advisories

In July 2024, the Water First Environmental Water Program launched the first Environmental Water Internship program in partnership with Mamaweswan, the North Shore Tribal Council (NSTC), which represents seven First Nations: Atikameksheng Anishinaabe, Batchewana First Nation, Garden River First Nation, Mississauga First Nation, Sagamok Anishnawbek First Nation, Serpent River First Nation, and Thessalon First Nation.

Over a 15-month period, the program provided more than 2,000 hours of hands-on training in classrooms, on the land, and at local water treatment facilities. This paid internship went beyond technical instruction, respectfully delivering skills training and support directly within the communities. To ensure accessibility for all participants, wrap-around support, including transportation, childcare, networking opportunities, and employment coaching, was provided.

Along with skills and experience, interns received three management certificates, which helped them gain confidence and a deeper connection to their land and community, and contribute to sustainable water resource solutions. The program addresses a critical gap by providing technical training that is based on collaboration and community consultation. To date, Water First has delivered over 90 Environmental Water workshops in Indigenous communities across Canada.¹⁴

This program illustrates how training Indigenous Peoples within their own communities to monitor, operate, and repair water systems contributes to both economic and social well-being by building local capacity and resilience.

Challenge: Limited Access to Adequate Healthcare

Chronic health issues, such as those caused by limited access to clean water, prevent Indigenous Peoples from participating in training, travel, entrepreneurship, or stable employment. These issues are worsened by difficulties in accessing healthcare. Indigenous Peoples across Canada face significant health disparities due to ongoing barriers to healthcare access. These barriers arise from systemic racism and discrimination, the legacy of colonialism, chronic underfunding, a lack of culturally safe care, and inadequate transportation and infrastructure in rural and remote areas.

Increased distinctions-based funding is critically needed in these areas to support infrastructure development. Access to healthcare services that reflect the unique needs and priorities of all Indigenous groups — First Nations, Métis, and Inuit — is essential to ensuring high-quality, culturally safe care. Bridging the infrastructure gap and improving healthcare access will not only enhance overall well-being but also contribute to economic growth and development.

¹⁴ Water First Education & Training Inc., Home, retrieved from <https://waterfirst.ngo/>.

Challenge: Limited Access to Safe Housing

Remote Indigenous communities continue to face a housing crisis. Overcrowding, poor living conditions, mold and moisture issues, structural deficiencies, and unmet repair needs all have detrimental impacts. These challenges are compounded by climate change, limited funding and capacity, and inequitable policies that negatively impact the health and well-being of Indigenous communities, particularly women, children, and Elders.

The AFN highlights these impacts, noting that in 2021, 54 per cent of children in care were Indigenous. Across the Prairies, 68 per cent of people using shelters were Indigenous. Both figures are attributed to unsafe and limited housing opportunities. As a foundational need, every aspect of life is affected without stable housing, including education, health, increased incarceration rates, and even mortality.¹⁵ Unsafe housing also undermines mobility, workforce retention, and project delivery. Bridging the housing gap by ensuring Indigenous communities have access to safe and affordable housing will contribute to job creation, economic growth, and reconciliation. **For Ontario's business community, this crisis presents both a responsibility and an opportunity. Addressing the housing gap is not only a moral imperative but also a strategic investment in the province's economic future.**

Businesses can support or co-develop housing projects with First Nations communities to ensure culturally appropriate design and delivery. They can also invest in workforce development opportunities through training, apprenticeships, and employment opportunities in trades and other skilled jobs. Additionally, businesses can prioritize Indigenous procurement for sourcing materials and labour, and advocate for inclusive infrastructure funding.

¹⁵ Assembly of First Nations, The Housing Gap, retrieved from <https://afn.ca/economy-infrastructure/infrastructure/closing-the-infrastructure-gap/housing/>.



Case Study: Tackling the Housing Crisis

In 2022, One Bowl, an Indigenous-owned not-for-profit organization led by Wahkonhtowin, was incorporated in response to the need for quality, long-lasting housing for Indigenous communities amid the housing crisis. This collaborative initiative comprises three First Nations in the Northeast Superior region: Chapleau Cree First Nation, Missanabie Cree First Nation, and Brunswick House First Nation.

The One Bowl Housing Corporation was named after the Dish with One Spoon Wampum, a symbol of shared resources and collective responsibility. It emphasizes sustainability and equity by imagining everyone eating from one bowl and using one spoon. This organization brings together First Nations communities, entrepreneurs, and strategic partners to promote economic participation, education, and employment, fostering community well-being and self-sufficiency.

Each housing kit includes doors, windows, a prefabricated frame, and thermal logs designed specifically for cold climates. The use of white pine on the exterior and interior ensures a high-quality, culturally resonant, and climate-friendly home.

To date, One Bowl has helped build approximately 20 homes in the Chapleau area and recently shipped 15 kits to the James Bay Coast for Kashechewan First Nation. Community-based training is underway to teach community members how to build homes, eliminate the need for outside contractors, and enhance their entrepreneurial skills.

Candace Larsen, One Bowl's business development officer, says that by the end of 2025, they expect to have trained over 50 individuals and invested more than \$500,000 into First Nations communities across the province.¹⁶



¹⁶ One Bowl, Home, retrieved from <https://www.onebowl.org/>.

Challenge: Limited Access to Reliable Roads

Increased funding for the development of safe and accessible all-season roads is crucial for fostering economic growth, strengthening community connections, and ensuring access to essential services such as healthcare and education. More than 50 First Nations in Canada, representing about 56,000 people, rely on roughly 6,000 km of winter roads — almost half of these communities are in Ontario.¹⁷

“Climate change has impacted winter ice roads, requiring us to transport all materials by rail to reach the Moosonee hospital construction site — posing significant logistical challenges.”

- Stan Kapashesit, Economic Development Manager,
Moose Cree First Nation

These communities often lack paved roads connecting them to the nearest urban centres, with some relying on air travel for most of the year as their only lifeline. In the winter, frozen creeks, lakes, and marshes allow for the construction of ice roads, which are critical for survival and community development. These roads are used for medical appointments, hunting and fishing trips, community gatherings, and stocking up on essential supplies such as food, water, lumber, and fuel.

Infrastructure limitations also make last-mile delivery essential for small businesses and underserved communities, as transporting mail or parcels from a person's doorstep to a distribution hub can be especially complicated due to Canada's vast geography and diverse climates. Canada Post is currently the only courier service mandated to deliver reliably to remote and northern communities.

¹⁷ Beaumont, Hilary, Climate Change Is Melting Ice Roads, a Lifeline for Remote Communities, IndigiNews, May 15, 2025, retrieved from <https://indiginews.com/features/climate-change-is-melting-ice-roads-a-lifeline-for-remote-communities>.





The shorter ice road season makes essential infrastructure delivery more difficult, yet communities still need to grow and thrive. A positive step for companies is to proactively engage with communities on issues like food costs. We're open to ideas and programs."

**- Stan Kapashesit, Economic Development Manager,
Moose Cree First Nation**

The need for permanent roads has become increasingly urgent as the climate crisis threatens the reliability of winter roads, creating severe challenges for impacted communities. In 2024, Chiefs in northern Ontario declared a state of emergency when the winter roads failed to freeze. The ice road season lasts approximately 11 weeks, from January to March, but estimates indicate that this window is shrinking each year.

This growing crisis, compounded by rising wildfires and torrential rain, has prompted First Nations to call for immediate funding for permanent infrastructure. The Ontario government, primarily responsible for funding and supporting these efforts, has increased its investment to maintain over 3,200 km of seasonal roads, serving approximately 24,000 people in 32 remote communities. The federal government also contributes through broader infrastructure programs.

To transition from reactive measures to long-term solutions, Ontario's business and government leaders must treat permanent road access as a gateway to prosperity and align it with larger infrastructure objectives. By aligning road development with broader infrastructure objectives, they can help close critical gaps while unlocking new opportunities for shared success. Key actions that businesses and government can take include prioritizing infrastructure investments in all-season roads, leveraging federal programs such as the National Trade Corridors Fund and provincial infrastructure grants, and ensuring that First Nations communities are at the core of planning and construction. Integrating roadbuilding with housing, broadband, and clean energy projects will further maximize impact and resilience.

When roads connect communities, they also connect markets, talent, and innovation, creating a ripple effect of economic and social benefits across the province.

Challenge: Limited Access to Reliable High-Speed Internet

Access to reliable and affordable high-speed internet is becoming increasingly essential for economic growth, efficient last-mile delivery, improved access to education and healthcare, and the preservation of Indigenous languages and cultures. Closing the digital divide is crucial for ensuring that Indigenous communities have equal opportunities to participate in the global economy, as it expands business and employment opportunities into new markets.

Broadband connectivity also provides access to opportunities that are available only through digital technology, such as remote work, online education and training, e-commerce, digital entrepreneurship, and virtual healthcare services. However, the current digital infrastructure gap is estimated at around \$3 billion. According to the Closing

the Infrastructure Gap report, 61 per cent of the 748 communities studied lacked access to adequate high-speed internet.¹⁸

Expanding broadband access not only strengthens community resilience but also unlocks new markets, talent pipelines, and innovation opportunities for Ontario's business sector. **Businesses can play a critical role in supporting Indigenous access to broadband infrastructure through public-private partnerships with Indigenous governments, federal programs, and provincial initiatives to co-finance broadband projects, ensuring Indigenous ownership and control remain central to digital infrastructure assets. Investments must treat broadband as a core infrastructure asset.**

Case Study: TELUS' Efforts to Expand Connectivity

As part of its Indigenous Reconciliation Action Plan, a growing tool used by companies to establish, measure, and be accountable for reconciliation efforts, TELUS has made it a key priority to collaborate with Indigenous governments and organizations to provide advanced broadband connectivity to Indigenous communities within its service areas.

In 2024, TELUS's co-funding partnerships expanded access to 21 Indigenous communities and 43 Indigenous lands. The company works closely with Indigenous communities to secure funding for expanding connectivity in participating areas. TELUS also launched a pilot universal service program that enables participating Indigenous governments to offer broadband services at a discounted rate to every household in their communities. The pilot is expected to provide valuable insights into how support can be expanded to even more Indigenous communities.

By exploring creative solutions arm in arm with Indigenous communities, TELUS has brought state-of-the-art infrastructure to regions previously hindered by unreliable internet service, unlocking business growth and innovation. For example, Tano Fuels in the Fort George area of the Lheidli T'enneh First Nation, located just north of Prince George, now accepts credit and debit card payments – a standard convenience in today's digital age.

TELUS complements its funding partnerships with listening tours to gain a deeper understanding of each community's needs. One such example was a community's goal for every individual to own a device and know how to use it effectively. This led to a series of workshops called TELUS Wise, which provided free digital literacy education to help communities connect and benefit from their improved connectivity.¹⁹

¹⁸ Assembly of First Nations, The Digital Connectivity Gap, Closing the Infrastructure Gap by 2030, 2023, retrieved from <https://afn.ca/economy-infrastructure/infrastructure/closing-the-infrastructure-gap/digital-connectivity/>.

¹⁹ TELUS, Rural and Indigenous Connectivity, TELUS Social Impact, retrieved from <https://www.telus.com/en/social-impact/connecting-canada/rural-and-indigenous-connectivity>.

The Four Rs: Respect, Responsibility, Reciprocity, and Renewal

Many deeply rooted principles, tools, and frameworks are available to help industry-led efforts to bridge Indigenous infrastructure gaps and promote land use that honours traditional values and cultural practices. These collective elements work together to create a more inclusive and respectful approach.

The original Anishinaabe treaty principles of Respect, Responsibility, Reciprocity, and Renewal (the Four Rs) can be meaningfully applied to contemporary business projects. These principles offer a framework for ethical, sustainable, and relational business practices. They are especially relevant in sectors such as natural resources, infrastructure, and community development, where long-term trust and shared stewardship are essential.

Respect

Companies must recognize and honour Indigenous rights, knowledge systems, and governance structures. This principle is exemplified by engaging Indigenous communities early in project planning, respecting their traditional territories, and incorporating cultural protocols into decision-making processes. It also means respecting the community's decision not to proceed with a project, even if that decision renders the project unviable without their involvement. If an Indigenous partner rejects a proposal, it may signal that the project does not truly align with community needs or that it may be better suited for another potential partner.

Responsibility

Companies that cultivate strong relationships with communities and proactively manage environmental risks are better positioned to attract capital and deliver long-term, sustainable returns for shareholders.

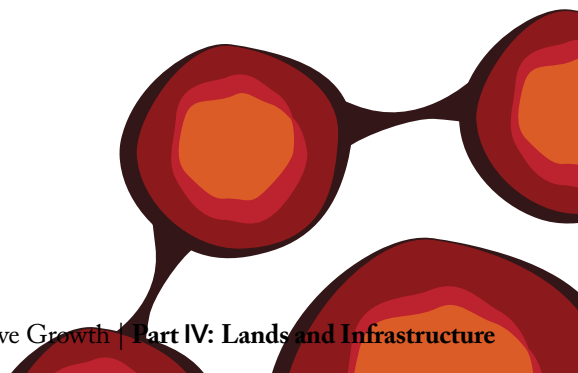
In contrast, neglecting the responsibilities that foster trust within communities can lead to project delays, legal conflicts, wasted resources, lost revenue, and reputational harm. Implementing sustainable practices, ensuring inclusive employment and procurement, and maintaining transparency in operations affecting Indigenous lands and Peoples lead to better outcomes for everyone.

Reciprocity

Business relationships must be mutually beneficial, otherwise they risk collapsing if one side views the relationship as exploitative of resources, people or communities. What reciprocity looks like can vary depending on several factors, including the recognition of rights, the sharing of complementary resources and capabilities, shared values, mutual trust, and fair exchange. Sharing profits fairly, co-developing projects, and investing in community-led initiatives that align with local priorities and values are clear ways to express reciprocity.

Renewal

Business relationships should be ongoing and adaptable, not just one-time transactions. Building long-term partnerships requires evolving over time, holding regular check-ins, and returning to the “Council Fire,” where decisions and agreements are traditionally made, for renegotiation or realignment as community needs change. Strong relationships are those that can adjust to shifting circumstances with a renewed sense of shared purpose. Even the strongest collaborations can occasionally go off track, but partners should never abandon communication, as long as their underlying values remain aligned.



Tools Towards Achieving Economic Reconciliation: UNDRIP, FPIC, DTC, and IBAs

Embracing the Four R's before engaging Indigenous Peoples and communities is crucial to building relationships grounded in trust and mutual understanding. These principles help ensure that resource development and land use align with treaty obligations, reflecting a strong commitment to protecting the next seven generations and understanding why that protection matters.

There are also tools and resources embedded into legislation and policy that serve as key mechanisms for practising the Four Rs. These include the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP); Free, Prior, and Informed Consent; Duty to Consult and Accommodate; and Impact Benefit Agreements. When applied with integrity, intention, and respect, rather than as checkboxes, they help ensure that Indigenous voices are meaningfully included and prioritized in decision-making, fostering long-term sustainability and stewardship for future generations.

For Ontario's business community, using these tools means fewer project delays, clearer schedules, and less risk of litigation. While these benefits are important, focusing solely on the costs of inaction overlooks the substantial benefits that come from applying these tools in a good way.

The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP)

UNDRIP was adopted by the United Nations on September 13, 2007, marking a significant milestone in the global recognition of Indigenous rights. This framework comprises 46 articles that establish a minimum standard for the recognition and respect of the universal rights of Indigenous Peoples, ensuring that their well-being and self-determination are upheld. Several key articles within UNDRIP directly address land use and resource development, forming the rights of Indigenous Peoples to ownership, control, protection, and benefit from their lands and resources.

“Article 18

Indigenous peoples have the right to participate in decision-making in matters which would affect their rights, through representatives chosen by themselves in accordance with their own procedures, as well as to maintain and develop their own indigenous decision-making institutions.”²⁰

“Article 26

- 1. Indigenous peoples have the right to the lands, territories and resources which they have traditionally owned, occupied or otherwise used or acquired.*
- 2. Indigenous peoples have the right to own, use, develop and control the lands, territories and resources that they possess by reason of traditional ownership or other traditional occupation or use, as well as those which they have otherwise acquired.*

States shall give legal recognition and protection to these lands, territories and resources. Such recognition shall be conducted with due respect to the customs, traditions and land tenure systems of the indigenous peoples concerned.”²¹

For companies, aligning with UNDRIP signals investment potential by grounding projects in rights-respecting processes that withstand scrutiny over time.

²⁰ Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples – Article 18, United Nations, retrieved from <https://www.ohchr.org/en/indigenous-peoples/un-declaration-rights-indigenous-peoples>.

²¹ Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples – Article 26, United Nations, retrieved from <https://www.ohchr.org/en/indigenous-peoples/un-declaration-rights-indigenous-peoples>.

Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC)

FPIC is one of the most prominent principles within the UNDRIP, outlining the control that Indigenous communities have over giving consent, as well as declining land development that may negatively impact their lands and resources. Article 32 of UNDRIP declares:

“States shall consult and cooperate in good faith with the indigenous peoples concerned through their own representative institutions in order to obtain their free and informed consent prior to the approval of any project affecting their lands or territories and other resources, particularly in connection with the development, utilization or exploitation of mineral, water or other resources.”²²

FPIC ensures that, prior to project development, Indigenous Peoples are consulted and cooperate as rightsholders, not stakeholders, while guaranteeing that the development process is culturally grounded in each individual community. This tool is rooted in the principle of reciprocity, fostering meaningful relationships built on shared values and commitments, while holding governments and developers accountable. FPIC, secured early, prevents late-stage surprises that keep the construction critical path intact.

Duty to Consult (DTC)

Duty to Consult (DTC) is a legal obligation rooted in Section 35 of the Constitution Act, which recognizes and affirms Aboriginal Treaty Rights. It was formally established in 2004 through the landmark *Haida Nation v. British Columbia (Minister of Forests)* case, which ruled that federal and provincial governments must engage in meaningful consultation and, if appropriate, accommodate Indigenous communities for decisions that impact non-proven land titles.²³

DTC complements FPIC, supports impact benefit agreements, and has become a critical part of the resource development and land planning process. It is important that the DTC, as a legal obligation, is undertaken in good faith to not only strengthen relationship-building with Indigenous communities that respect Indigenous rights and knowledge but also to avoid conflict and legal challenges.

Impact Benefit Agreements (IBAs)

Impact benefit agreements (IBAs) remain a pivotal tool for benefit-sharing in resource development across Canada, reflecting the importance of Indigenous rights alongside shared economic interests. IBAs began to emerge in the 1980s and 1990s, with early agreements focused on employment, training, and contracting opportunities, as well as, in some instances, financial compensation.

However, since the adoption of UNDRIP and the principles of FPIC, IBA agreements have undergone significant evolution. When properly used and implemented in alignment with UNDRIP, IBAs can extend beyond economic benefits to encompass a wider spectrum of social development and well-being. This includes the preservation of Traditional Knowledge and culture, environmental sustainability, and the establishment of meaningful relationships based on reciprocity, all in line with Indigenous values and seven-generation thinking.

²² Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples – Article 32, United Nations, retrieved from <https://www.ohchr.org/en/indigenous-peoples/un-declaration-rights-indigenous-peoples>.

²³ Raven Trust, “Haida Claim to Haida Gwaii,” Raven, <https://raventrust.com/articles/haida-claim-to-haida-gwaii/>.

Case Study: Asubpeeschoseewagong First Nation (Grassy Narrows)

When the Four Rs principles are not meaningfully applied, the consequences can be severe for both Indigenous communities and project outcomes. For industry proponents, this may include litigation, project delays, reputational damage, and investment uncertainty. More critically, Indigenous Peoples and communities may suffer from chronic health issues, higher mortality rates, lower employment, cultural and spiritual loss, ecological destruction, and abject poverty. In some cases, the loss of trust in industry can last for decades, hindering all meaningful collaboration, infrastructure development, and economic growth.

This has been an unfortunate reality for members of the Grassy Narrows First Nation in Northwestern Ontario. During the 1960s and 1970s, approximately 10 tonnes of mercury and industrial waste were intentionally discharged from a Kenora-area pulp mill into the river system, travelling 10 km along the English-Wabigoon river to unsuspecting First Nations communities. The company responsible did not take proper precautions or meaningful steps to remediate the damage and was never held accountable. It continues to operate today under a different business name.²⁴

A study from the University of Western Ontario found that mercury-contaminated water entered the local food chain, particularly affecting the walleye, a dietary staple for Grassy Narrows members for thousands of years. Today, the mill's wastewater is free of mercury but contains high levels of sulfate and organic matter, which foster bacteria that produce methylmercury when mercury is present in the environment. Methylmercury is a form of mercury that can dangerously accumulate in the body.²⁵

Once converted to methylmercury, the fish became highly toxic and unsafe for human consumption. Generations of families now live with elevated levels of mercury in their blood, leading to symptoms ranging from numbness, tremors,

and cognitive delays to birth defects, seizures, and premature death. Mental health issues and suicide are widespread. These outcomes have been linked to mercury poisoning, believed to stem from eating contaminated fish, and the crisis appears to be worsening over time.

In response, some community members have taken proactive steps to monitor activities such as logging and mining claims on their reserve lands and traditional territories. These efforts demonstrate a deep commitment to preserving the land and waters for future generations. Their advocacy has extended to the Ring of Fire region – an ecologically sensitive peatland with significant critical mineral deposits that are vital to battery technology and the green energy transition.

As governments and corporations explore opportunities in this area, many First Nations communities are working to ensure that development is approached responsibly, with full consideration of environmental stewardship, cultural values, and long-term community well-being. While Indigenous Peoples are also interested in exploring these opportunities, they require meaningful consultation to ensure fair and equitable participation.

Given the historical context, it is understandable that increased industrial activity and land use proposals may raise concerns for Indigenous communities. Thus, it is important to recognize the need for trust, transparency, and respect for rights. A more constructive approach begins with resetting relationships and co-developing solutions through genuine partnership. This may involve businesses sharing resources and supporting capacity-building – not as charity, but as a meaningful gesture of collaboration. When time is invested in relationship-building, it creates space for dialogue, mutual understanding, and long-term economic reconciliation.

²⁴ Morin, Brandi, "For them it's money, for us it's life": Grassy Narrows' 60-year legacy of poison, Ricochet, November 28, 2023, retrieved from <https://ricochet.media/indigenous/for-them-its-money-for-us-its-life-grassy-narrows-60-year-legacy-of-poison>.

²⁵ Sarah Law, "Grassy Narrows First Nation Study Finds Elevated Methylmercury Levels," CBC News, November 14, 2025, retrieved from <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/thunder-bay/grassy-narrows-first-nation-methylmercury-study-1.7211750>.

"A Thousand Cups of Tea": A Two-Eyed Seeing Framework and Returning to Reciprocity and Seventh Generation Principles

Understanding the significant differences in Indigenous and Western value systems is essential for building respectful, equitable relationships based on shared goals and aspirations. The Two-Eyed Seeing approach, also known as Etuaptmunk, was introduced by respected Mi'kmaw Elder Albert Marshall and encourages viewing the world through both Indigenous and Western lenses. Originally developed to support Mi'kmaq students in science education, it has since evolved into a widely adopted cross-cultural framework for collaboration in various fields, including health, education, and environmental stewardship.²⁶

Businesses, project developers, and governments involved in infrastructure development can still meet their goals, but only by listening, integrating both worldviews respectfully, and finding a balance that avoids dominance. Power and profit must be weighed against values such as balance, belonging, relational wealth, and responsibility.

Indigenous worldviews embrace holistic values, prioritizing cultural continuity, environmental stewardship, collective well-being. Concepts such as the Seven Sacred Teachings, the Seven Generation Principle, and the Medicine Wheel can deepen understanding and support partnership and collaboration.

Western perspectives typically prioritize economic and social objectives such as personal income, employment, and property ownership, often measuring success by the accumulation of individual wealth. While these approaches differ, both aim for stability and prosperity, though they define and pursue them in fundamentally different ways.

For Ontario's business community, adopting the Two-Eyed Seeing approach begins with investing time in relationship-building, valuing both knowledge systems equally, and incorporating Indigenous ways of knowing into practice. By sitting down and sharing "a thousand cups of tea," trust can be rebuilt, and current business goals realigned with Indigenous Knowledge Systems and the values of the seven generations.

The following case studies highlight projects with substantial Indigenous participation, often involving consortia of communities from the early or pre-development stages. These groups collaborate by combining their resources, capacities, and knowledge to achieve shared goals.

²⁶ Two-Eyed Seeing. About. I' kanaatsi Park Program, retrieved from <https://www.2eyedseeing.ca/about-5>.



Case Study: Electrification and Diesel Reduction Through the Watay Power Project

The Wataynikaneyap Power Project in northern Ontario is the first Indigenous-led initiative to connect 16 remote First Nations to the provincial power grid. The project is majority-owned by a partnership of 24 First Nations, some of which are not among the 16 being connected, alongside private investors. Valued at \$1.6 billion, the initiative plans to eventually transition to 100 per cent Indigenous ownership. Construction financing included a loan of up to \$1.34 billion from the Ontario government.²⁷

Construction generated \$957 million in GDP contributions, \$539 million in wages, 685 full-time equivalent (FTE) positions, and \$220 million in government revenues.²⁸ Other benefits of electrification include lowering energy costs for communities, increasing reliability and capacity for housing development, community infrastructure, and digital services, as well as improving the health and safety of community members.

The partnership also established Opiikapawiin Services, which has provided skills development, community engagement, and support services. Its holistic approach integrates land-based learning with Western methodologies, promoting both technical capacity and cultural resilience. This model shows how major infrastructure projects can advance both economic and social progress on community terms.

Case Study: 50/50 Equity Partnership in the Wassigan Transmission Line Project

In 2024, Hydro One Inc. and nine First Nations, represented by Gwayakocchigewin Limited Partnerships (GLP), broke ground on the Wassigan Transmission Line Project. Under a 50-50 equity model, First Nation communities secured equal ownership in the new 230 kV transmission lines from Thunder Bay to Atikokan and from Atikokan to Dryden.

The project will deliver 350 megawatts (MW) of clean electricity to Northwestern Ontario, supporting regional mining and industrial growth, and advancing economic reconciliation.²⁹

Years of engagement with Elders and community leadership ensured alignment with Anishinaabe teachings, culture, and land for future generations. The project includes traditional land use plans and Indigenous monitoring to safeguard grave sites, harvesting areas, and spiritual sites. Hydro One's framework for shared ownership, accountability, and prosperity.³⁰

²⁷ CBC News, "Wataynikaneyap Power, Federal Government Sign Funding Agreement," July 23, 2019, retrieved from <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/thunder-bay/wataynikaneyap-power-federal-government-1.5220786>.

²⁸ PricewaterhouseCoopers LLP, Socioeconomic Impact Analysis of the Wataynikaneyap Power Project, Wataynikaneyap Power, June 2023, retrieved from https://cdn.prod.website-files.com/58a48de60f46d5e57d3e0a28/66b63de666676fa02fd9f1ad_PWC-Socioeconomic-Impact-Analysis-Watay.pdf.

²⁹ Hydro One, "Wassigan Transmission Line Project," retrieved from <https://www.hydroone.com/about/corporate-information/major-projects/wassigan>.

³⁰ Eagle Lake First Nation, "Wassigan Transmission Line," retrieved from <https://eaglelakefn.ca/wassigan-transmission-line/>.

Case Study: Oneida Energy Storage Facility's Model for Public-Private Collaboration

The Oneida Energy Storage Facility is a strategic partnership between the Six Nations of the Grand River Development Corporation, the economic development arm of the Haudenosaunee community of Six Nations, and NRStor, later joined by Northland Power (majority equity partner), Aecon Concessions, and Mississaugas of the Credit Business Corporation. Located in Haldimand County, it is Canada's largest battery energy storage facility, featuring a fully operational 250 MW/1,000 MWh lithium-ion battery storage system.

“

When we first introduced the concept of energy storage in Canada, having NRStor as a foundational partner made all the difference. The process was challenging, but our ongoing collaboration turned those challenges into opportunities. We fully embraced the spirit of a true 50/50 partnership, one built on trust, mutual respect, and the ability to draw on each other's strengths to achieve success.”

**- Matt Jamieson, President & CEO,
Six Nations of the Grand River Development Corporation**

The Oneida Energy Storage Facility is helping to reshape Ontario's energy future- strengthening the grid by diversifying supply, reducing dependence on natural gas, cutting emissions, and lowering long-term costs for ratepayers. During construction, more than 180 jobs were created, with a strong commitment to hiring locally. A6N, a partnership between Six Nations of the Grand River Development Corporation and Aecon Utilities, played a central role in the build, employing over 40 Indigenous workers. Their involvement not only contributed to the project's success but also built valuable, transferable skills that will support future energy projects across the region.

The facility stands as a powerful example of what's possible when Indigenous leadership, private-sector expertise, and government support come together. Through a 50-50 development partnership model, and with the backing of the Canada Infrastructure Bank and a \$50 million grant from Natural Resources Canada, Oneida Energy demonstrates how shared ownership can de-risk clean energy investments and provide a compelling blueprint for advancing renewable infrastructure under Indigenous leadership.³¹

³¹ Oneida Energy Storage, 2025, retrieved from <https://www.oneidaenergystorage.ca/>.

Reconciliation Pathways: Key Actions

The following recommendations are intended for corporations and governments contributing to infrastructure development across the province. They aim to enhance First Nations community prosperity by ensuring access to world-class infrastructure grounded in respect for traditional land use and built through genuine partnerships that unlock shared opportunities.

- 1. Begin consultation early in the development process.** Businesses and governments must treat Indigenous engagement as a strategic starting point, and not a late-stage check-box requirement. If a project spans a decade, engagement should begin now. Early dialogue allows communities to assess proposals, align them with local priorities, make informed decisions, and prepare for participation on their own timelines. Proactive consultation reduces risk, builds trust, and leads to smoother execution.
- 2. Invest in enabling infrastructure** such as roads, utilities, and digital access to unlock wider economic opportunities for Indigenous communities. Businesses should ensure engagement is collaborative, with a focus on building local capacity for long-term participation in infrastructure and economic initiatives.

These efforts could enhance market access, improve procurement competitiveness, support workforce development, enhance reputation and financial performance, and strengthen social license to operate.
- 3. Lead beyond compliance to build genuine and meaningful partnerships.** Businesses should operate in the spirit of the duty to consult and the principles of UNDRIP, even when not legally mandated. Respect for traditional land use and Indigenous knowledge should inform every stage of development, ensuring that mutual prosperity is prioritized. Businesses that go beyond minimum requirements and co-create solutions with communities position themselves as long-term partners with a genuine commitment to reconciliation, not just project proponents.
- 4. Align proposals with community values and needs.** Before approaching a community with a proposal, businesses should first build a relationship to understand its existing development plans and goals. The proposal can then be developed, ideally in partnership, to align with the community's vision of success.
- 5. Collaborate with First Nations communities** to ensure resources for meaningful participation, including training support and incorporation of Indigenous Knowledge Systems into development plans. Building capacity early helps align priorities, avoid costly disputes, and foster sustainable ecosystems that extend beyond the project lifecycle.
- 6. Support models of community-led environmental oversight alongside government regulators.** Joint monitoring fosters trust, reduces the likelihood of legal or reputational challenges, and ensures effective site rehabilitation, thereby protecting community interests and promoting long-term business certainty.
- 7. Maintain open and respectful communication throughout the partnership.** Even during difficult conversations or breakdowns in communication, it is essential to uphold the engagement framework and revisit shared goals and values. Sustained engagement also requires commitment from top leadership. Overall true partnership means co-developing decisions, not informing communities after the fact. Businesses that invest in relationship-building unlock long-term trust, innovation, market access, and will enjoy the benefits of a shared prosperity.

