

Indigenous Approaches to Program Evaluation



This evaluation tool shares some of the context, impetus, and models for co-designing a participatory framework for Indigenous program evaluation -- according to the values, principles, stories and performance indicators determined by an Indigenous Nation or organization.

Impetus for Indigenous sovereignty and ownership

Historically, Indigenous Nations have not had a positive experience with researchers and evaluators from external institutions as data has been collected on, analyzed and controlled by institutional, government and industry agendas. Data and information have been used and disseminated at the discretion of non-Indigenous institutions and decision-makers, with little to no permissions sought or input from Indigenous leaders or citizens as to how their data should be used.

Data gathered on Indigenous peoples (sometimes through unethical means) have constituted the majority of program assessments, research, policy and survey studies on Indigenous peoples – with these data being used historically as a disempowering tool to control populations and gain access to Indigenous lands, natural resources, bodies and knowledges.

Evaluation is a systematic determination of an initiative's performance and an assessment of its value and significance, using methodologies and criteria governed by a set of standards that are determined by settler institutions and industries that are not knowledgeable of Indigenous realities. These methodologies and criteria are often considered by communities to be invasive and unresponsive to the interests and priorities of Indigenous peoples. Without understanding the context and program expectations of a particular community, one-size-fits-all approaches and criteria developed for assessing mainstream programs are unable to provide the culturally specific and values-based information that are important to measuring beneficial impacts for the community.

For Indigenous community, program evaluations are culturally sensitive and should include important contextual factors (historical, social, cultural, and environmental) that are aligned with the particular guidelines or regulations governing an Indigenous Nation's engagement with non-Indigenous institutions.

Instead of trying to fit an Indigenous community into externally dictated methods and metrics, Indigenous approaches to evaluation use established practices and methods that fit an Indigenous community's needs and conditions.

As sovereign Nations, Indigenous peoples hold the right to self-determine their own community development pathways, and how knowledge and data about them are collected, used, controlled and shared. This right to self-determination and sovereignty over how data is measured and the narrative created from that data apply to program evaluation.

In terms of control over evaluation, the ideal approach is for the community to have total control over the evaluation, including defining criteria, data collection and analysis, reporting results and decision making -- with the evaluator acting on behalf of the community. An Indigenous-controlled evaluation approach enables the community with self-determination over: participants and depth of participation; and evaluation criteria, performance indicators, data parameters, and how they wish to tell their story historically, today, and into the future.

Developing an Indigenous framework for evaluation

In designing the evaluation framework, the story of the project that is most important to the community -- such as how a dedicated Indigenous gathering space has impacted the social, emotional, cultural, spiritual and physical health and wellbeing of community members -- should dictate the assessment questions/indicators and methods used. The methods influence the design of the evaluation and constitute the scaffolding of the evaluation framework. Moreover, the data produced by the framework's chosen methods will build the story that is valuable to the community and to civic partners.

Program evaluation, informed by the core values and sovereignty of the Indigenous Nation, can help them to tell their stories in an evidence-based way that can strengthen their decision making and devel-

opment of a project to have the greatest impact value for community members. It can also increase a sense of teamwork among participants, program staff and partners. In developing the scaffolding framework for evaluation, the following principles will help guide Indigenous and civic organizations:

- Indigenous Nations have ways of assessing merit or worth based on traditional values and cultural expressions.
- This knowledge should inform how evaluation is conducted and used in our communities.
- Indigenous framing for evaluation incorporates broadly held cultural and ethical values while remaining flexible and responsive to a particular Nation's knowledge and practice.
- Responsive evaluation uses practices and methods from the field of evaluation that fit an Indigenous community's needs and conditions.
- By defining evaluation, its meaning, practice, and efficacy in a community's own terms, they are able to take ownership. They are not merely responding to the requirements imposed by Western assessment methodologies.
- Evaluation should respect and serve a Nation's goals for self-determination and sovereignty.
- Evaluation is an opportunity for a Nation/community to learn from their programs and effectively use their data and information to create strong, viable communities.

- Evaluation design and methods need to revisit the cultural, relational and experiential ways that knowledge is learned, supporting multiple ways of knowing (experiential, observation, experimentation, narrative, taught) -- what Western evaluation science describes as quantitative and qualitative methods.

Strategies for grounding the program evaluation in Indigenous values and knowledges

Beliefs and Values (Indigenous Framework)

Indigenous Knowledge Creation – Context and Use are Critical

- Describe how the evaluation itself will become part of the program and will be included throughout the program implementation Consider how to analyze specific variables without ignoring the contextual situation designs
- Ensure that the context of the program is fully understood by any external evaluators and is described in any evaluation reports
- Allow time for continuous reflection on what is learned and ensure that evaluation findings will be used.

People of a Place – Respect Placed-based Programs

- Honor the places-based nature of many of our programs.
- Include information regarding how the program is situated within the community and how it connects to other programs and initiatives.
- Celebrate success, however do not conclude that what works in the local situation can be transferred or generalized to other contexts without appropriate contextual adaptations.

Centrality of Community and Family – Connect Evaluation to Community

- Create opportunities for engaging community through participatory evaluation practices when planning and implementing the evaluation
- Make evaluation processes transparent so key stakeholders understand its role and how it will be implemented
- Understand that programs may not focus only on individual achievement, but also on restoring community health and well being, and find ways to capture this in the program's story

Recognizing our Gifts – Personal Sovereignty; Consider the Whole Person when Assessing Merit

- Allow for creativity and self-expression
- Recognize that people enter programs at different places and with different skills and experience
- Use multiple ways to measure accomplishment of individuals and/or groups
- Honor accomplishment while recognizing that everyone has value and different gifts
- Make connections to accomplishment and responsibility to self and community

Sovereignty – Create Ownership and Build Capacity

- Follow Native Institutional Review Board processes or other tribal/community protocols for evaluation and research
- Include consent processes that allow people to see how their information is interpreted
- Use approaches and methods that will build evaluation capacity in the community and create opportunities for community members to develop evaluation skills
- Secure proper permission if future publishing is expected

Share evaluation information in ways that celebrate your accomplishments and described what you have learned

Indigenous knowledge traditions remind us that gathering and evaluating knowledge and data is about more than explaining an “objectified” world. Evaluation should value the subjective, which is the relationship of program actors to fact and experience, as interpreted through their own worldview. Without exploring individual and collective experiences, a program’s narrative cannot be fully understood.

As such, quantitative assessment methods and data are only one dimension of the story that an evaluation needs to tell. Qualitative methods and data draw out a richer dimension of the story based on the subjective perspectives, experiences and relationships of the program actors -- and are often expressed through narratives, testimonies and images, rather than numbers. From an Indigenous evaluation lens, this program data can be collected through:

- Stories of experiences, relationships and change captured in talking about the program:
 - From community members and other stakeholders engaged in the program (partners, collaborators, participants, clients/site users)
- Testimonies collected from program actors (partners, collaborators, participants, clients/site users)
- Images created through photographs or drawings; images of relationship captured in video recordings

Participatory Evaluation Framework

Participatory approach to evaluation has the goal of improving the program overall rather than simply proving its efficacy.

A participatory approach is often associated with an improved program performance, empowerment and capacity building of participants, and a sustained organizational learning in the long term.

Within placekeeping and city building practices, there is an emphasis on embedding participatory lens to community engagement and evaluation manifested by processes and tools to facilitate participation, inclusion and experimentation. Tension and trust challenges can arise when these evaluation practices are not culturally sensitive and inclusive of Indigenous Nations’ contextual factors.

Engaging in a participatory evaluation framework that is centered on professional and cultural codes of conduct (featured below) will produce an evaluation with the greatest utility for all program partners (Indigenous and non-Indigenous), and deliver the most effective and meaningful program outcomes.

In a participatory evaluation, Indigenous partners and program actors should be involved in:

- Naming and framing the goals to be addressed.
- Developing a theory of practice (process, logic model) for how to achieve success.
- Identifying the questions to ask about the project and the best ways to ask them - these questions will identify what the project means to do for the community and therefore what should be evaluated.
- Collecting knowledge and data about the project.
- Making sense of that data and revealing the emergent story.
- Deciding what to celebrate, and what to adjust or change to make improvements, based on information from the evaluation.

Beginning the program evaluation process

Program evaluation answers three key sets of questions:

1. What? What do we want to know and what is the program all about?
 - What is the story(ies) about the program that needs to be told?
 - Is the program achieving its goals?
 - Are the program design, content, communications and delivery inclusive and culturally relevant to the community?
 - Does the program respond to identified needs and realities in the community? Is program delivery improved?
 - Is the program accountable to community, program clients, and program funders/sponsors?
2. So what? Is the program making a difference (and for whom)?
 - Is the program still relevant?
 - Is the program informing social policy relevant to the community's well being?
 - Is the program contributing to the base of knowledge/data of the community and partners?
3. Now what? Do we make changes to improve the program?
 - Do we continue funding the program?
 - Can support for the program be amplified?

Code of conduct

Before proceeding with an evaluation project with Indigenous partners and community, it is important to review the code of conduct i.e. ethical principles and standards that will guide the engagement and assessment process with Indigenous program actors. Evaluators and researchers are expected by Indigenous Nations and organizations to follow a code of conduct that will guide ethical practice during an assessment study or process. The role of evaluators in early stages of an assessment includes developing a close, long-term, involved and trusting relationship with community partners, members and program clients.

The following "4 Rs" of engagement with Indigenous peoples are integral to an Indigenous evaluation framework:

1. Respect and value for diverse forms of Indigenous knowledge:
 - Understanding and practicing Nation/community protocols
 - Being critically reflective and non-judgemental
 - Being able to listen and open to learning
 - Building on cultural, social and spiritual values that can only come from the community.
2. Relevance to community and cultural needs and experiences:
 - Communities should be part of designing the research questions as well as the methods and interpretation of findings.
 - Evaluator must be clear about their intentions, and factual information must be useful for local governance.

3. Reciprocity where both the community and evaluator benefit from a two-way process of learning and research.
 - Evaluator must ensure that outcomes and knowledge gained through the evaluation will be shared through the entire process
4. Responsibility to create space for deep engagement and participation by community members throughout evaluation design, data collection, analysis and reporting.
 - Evaluator continues to develop and maintain credibility with the community by considering all perspectives, working collaboratively and sharing findings.

Many Nations and urban Indigenous organizations will have formally articulated codes of conduct that will guide evaluation and research engagement with a particular community. Two Indigenous-informed national level frameworks include comprehensive codes of conduct that are appropriate across different Nations and urban communities in Canada:

- [The Royal Commission of Aboriginal Peoples \(1996\) ethical guidelines for research](#)
- [Tri-Council Policy Statement \(2010\) from: Canadian Institute of Health Research \(CIHR\), Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada \(NSERC\), Social Sciences and the Humanities Research Council of Canada \(SSHRC\)](#)

Respect for Indigenous community and Nation sovereignty are core values to bring to the process. To honor these values, evaluators should find ways to engage the community and create a sense of ownership of the evaluation process.

Involving relevant Indigenous practitioners and community actors in program evaluation will increase its cultural grounding, usefulness and credibility. Their input can strengthen evaluation co-design and lead to a more accurate understanding of the program, especially in terms of advancement of community-identified priorities and outcomes.



Credit: Banff Centre for Arts and Creativity, Indigenous Leadership: Indigenous Evaluation Frameworks

Types of Evaluation Activities

1. **Community Needs Assessment:** this type of evaluation study provides a holistic, comprehensive and unbiased documentation of the needs in the whole community. It identifies the strengths, capacities and resources available in the Nation/community (i.e. citizens, agencies, and organizations) to meet the needs of the community and is an essential first step in program development, and also useful in making iterative changes to an existing program (Annex 1).

It provides a framework for identifying and resourcing gaps and barriers; and developing and identifying existing assets (knowledge, cultural, ecological, resources), services and solutions in support of building strong and holistic community wellbeing. The assessment enables an organization to identify if there is a need for a program, community needs, and determine if similar programs exist elsewhere or whether there are gaps in services.

A community assessment may include:

- Demographic data from census records
- Results of surveys conducted by others
- Informal feedback from community partners
- Interviews and focus group discussions
- Community meetings
- Surveys to partnership members and the community

2. **A Joint SWOT Analysis:** (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats) (Annex 2) is a well-known strategic planning and evaluation tool that identifies the weaknesses and strengths of an initiative, as well as potential opportunities and threats. A joint SWOT analysis mobilizes community partners or initiative participants to collaborate in evaluating an implemented project or activity as a means of understanding how to develop or strengthen it, where the gaps and barriers are, and how to leverage available opportunities.

It is essential to develop or strengthen a program that reflects and builds on where you are at and where you've come from. This exercise will help to highlight your assets and the positive forces that can contribute to the success of your program and clarify potential problems that need to be addressed.

3. **Assessing Program Theory:** is a valuable approach to articulating program concept, design, goals and objectives and can include the development of the Program Logic Model (Annex 3). A well-defined program theory would include:

- Assumptions about the impacts of the program
- How to reach target community groups or populations
- What services are needed
- An organizational plan that includes interaction between program resources, staff and program activities.

4. Assessing Program Process: review program delivery and management, as well as client satisfaction. where we look at day-to-day program delivery and management, measure client satisfaction, develop a client profile, and see if the program has reached the target population.

5. Assessing Impact: measuring outcomes and impact and benefits to the intended target groups.

6. Efficiency Assessment: indicates the cost-benefit ratio and how cost-effective is the program.

Each activity is developmental in nature and each builds on the other.

ANNEX 1: Community Needs Assessment

There are different approaches to conducting community needs assessments. The following tool outlines the key stages that should be adapted to the unique program and community contexts framing the evaluation.



- **Step 1:**
Plan for a community needs assessment
 - Identify and assemble a diverse community team
 - Develop a team strategy
 - Define community to assess (e.g. urban mixed Indigenous community, rural/remote community, confederacy, region)
 - Identify community sectors to assess (e.g., health care, schools)
 - Identify community components to assess (e.g. art, ceremony, land stewardship)
 - Develop questions to ask for each community component
 - Select sites and number of sites to visit within each sector
 - Determine existing data to use or methods for collecting new data
 - Identify key community organizations, knowledge-keepers, practitioners, community leaders to contact
- **Step 2:**
Conduct the needs assessment
- **Step 3:**
Review, consolidate, analyze and interpret the data (qualitative and quantitative) from all sources
- **Step 4:**
Review data analysis and emerging story/outcomes with Indigenous partners and program actors

- **Step 5:**
Develop a community action plan
 - Identify community assets and needs
 - Prioritize needs
 - Develop and prioritize strategies for improvement based on community input
 - Create an action plan for top priority strategies

ANNEX 2: Community Needs Assessment

Background

A SWOT analysis is a structured way to evaluate a project or idea. It looks at strengths that people can build on; weaknesses that need to be addressed; opportunities to invest in; and threats to identify and mitigate.

Strengths and weaknesses are internal (under the direct control of partners), whereas opportunities and threats are external (not controlled by the partners).

Conducting a SWOT analysis for a specific project or plan will be a familiar practice for many people working in the field of economic development. However, partners may not be familiar with analyzing initiatives from the vantage point of a partnership rather than a single community.

A joint SWOT analyzes the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats of the partnership. One community's weakness is often the other's strength. By working together, communities can reduce risks and create a stronger project or plan. This tool can help you prioritize opportunities for joint CED based on what is most strategic to pursue jointly. Partners should focus on seeing where strengths and opportunities overlap, rather than on looking at the potential weaknesses and threats faced by a certain course of action.

Instructions

The questions in this exercise are intended to spark conversation and brainstorming. Not all the questions require full answers.

1. Each small group will explore a specific idea for joint Community Economic Development (such as a joint tourism strategy). Ask someone to take notes on what people say and to report back to the larger group.
2. Take 10–15 minutes to discuss what would be involved in pursuing this opportunity for joint Community Economic Development and the benefits you could expect by doing so. Capture the discussion on a flipchart.
3. Take a new flipchart paper and divide it in four equal sections (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats).
4. Using the questions below, take 10–15 minutes to discuss your partnership's internal strengths and weaknesses, as they relate to your idea.

Strengths	Weaknesses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How would working jointly on this idea be a win-win situation? • Do our communities' strengths build on one another (are they complementary)? • Would working jointly on this idea maximize what we already do well as partners? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are there reasons why we should not undertake this? • As a partnership, what would need to improve so we can achieve the results we want? • What is our partnership lacking in terms of necessary knowledge, skills, capacity or motivation?

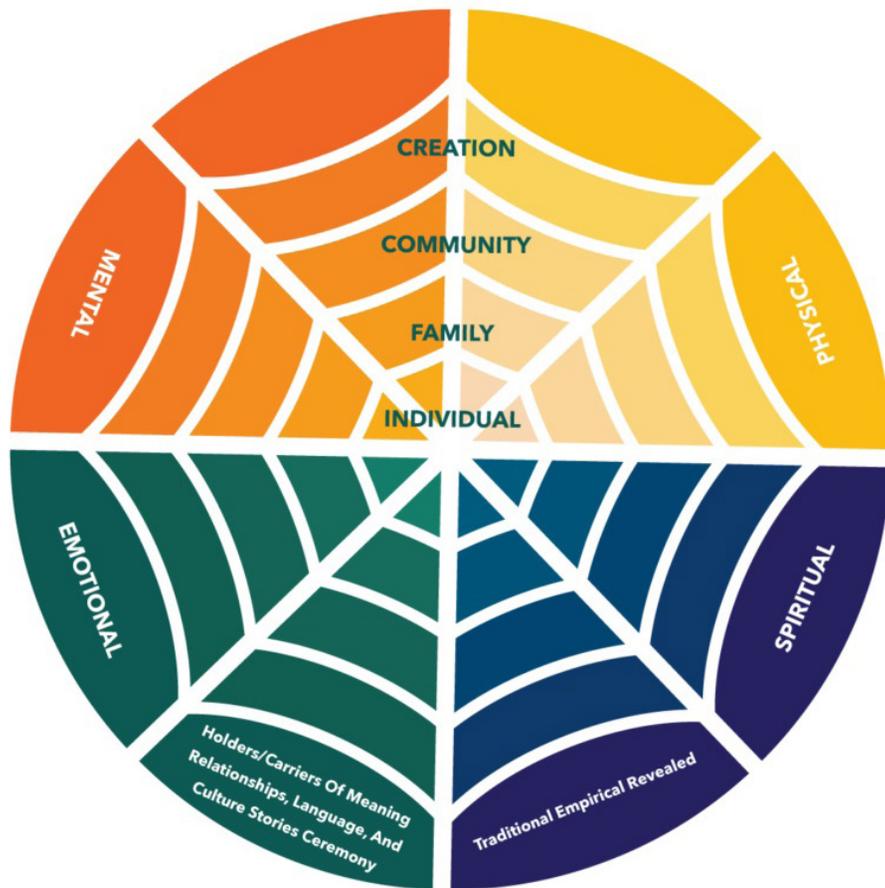
5. Using the next set of questions, take 10–15 minutes to discuss the external opportunities and threats related to your idea.

Opportunities	Threats
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What real opportunities exist? • What opportunities might be available to us as communities working in partnership (rather than us doing this alone)? • What is going on around us that could be useful? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What immediate obstacles does our partnership face? • Who might cause problems in the future and how? • What external factors over which we have limited control might cause difficulties for our partnership?

6. Share your discussion with the larger group.

ANNEX 3: Program Logic Model

The Program Logic Model (PLM) is a tool often used to assess the program theory and outlines the program purpose, why it is important, and the intended program outcomes. The PLM should be the first task completed in any evaluation as it provides a theoretical framework for the evaluation and is meant to be flexible and evolve as the program develops. It is based on community and program actor input as well as a literature review.



Credit: NB3 Foundation's Indigenous Health Model (IHM). Adapted from <https://www.nb3foundation.org/indig-health-mod/>

5 basic PLM components:

1. Barriers and resources that could limit or enable the program delivery
2. Activities such as a process, product, service, or infrastructure
3. Program outputs that narrate and quantify activities
4. Outcomes measured in short, medium and long-term time ranges
5. Impacts or long-term results from the program – often thought as system-, societal-, or policy-level changes

Steps to take when conducting a PLM program evaluation:

1. Engage your stakeholders: who should be involved, how should they be involved?
2. Focus the evaluation: what do we want to know?
 - How will the evaluation be delivered, and how will the findings be used?
3. Collect information: how will you gather information (surveys, interviews, file reviews, reports etc.) and who will be involved?
4. Analyze and interpret your findings: what does the information mean with respect to your program?
5. Use the information – Prepare a report to share the findings. How will you learn from the findings? Develop recommendations and next steps.