

Book Review

Carol Anne Hilton, *Indigenomics:
Taking a Seat at the Economic Table*
(BC: NEW SOCIETY PUBLISHERS, 2021)

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Indigenous peoples in Canada and around the world, for that matter, have come a very long way in addressing challenges and obstacles to nurturing and building healthy nations, communities, and economies. It has been our privilege to shed light on the resilience and tenacity demonstrated in stories and actions across this nation over the last half century. Community and business leaders have demonstrated incredible tenacity and strength in addressing the real economic challenges arising from a history of exclusion. There is a strong coterie of fellow researchers in the academy who have followed this journey, and without a doubt, we, as Indigenous people, are a powerful people, as noted throughout Carol Anne Hilton's new book on the future of the Indigenous economy. The book, based upon her work at the Indigenomics Institute, paints a picture of a future full of opportunity and promise for those who are ready, with gratitude to those who are making the way forward.

The Indigenous world of the early 21st century is not the world of the mid-20th century. We now conceive of our communities not just as social entities but as economies to be shaped to meet our own development goals and contribute to the Canadian economy. This conception was inconceivable to those reviewing the Indian Act in the 1950s or to Hawthorn and his UBC researchers in the 1960s. This conception provides opportunities to bring new thinking to the table and a new generation of leaders, unburdened of the constant necessity to create economic space for Indigenous peoples. What is the next generation of thought

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leaders adding to this long conversation? Carol Anne Hilton, author of *Indigenomics: Taking a Seat at the Economic Table* (2021), is from the Hesquiaht Nation, a small community that was devastated by a tsunami in 1964, causing most families to move to town. She earned her MBA from the University of Hertfordshire, England. While she has no record of scholarly articles, she has teaching experience in several Canadian business schools and serves on several boards. Her book is based on her extensive experience as a policy advisor and on the applied research of the Indigenomics Institute, which she founded.

Indigenomics: Taking a Seat at the Economic Table is an interesting addition to the small but growing field of research on the Indigenous economy. The catchphrase “Indigenomics” is catchy, and the author has made sure that readers get the drift that it is intended to replace any reference to Indigenous economic development or community development, where it sucks every unsuspecting thing into its great maw and relabels it “Indigenomics”. It is a rebranding strategy taken to a fever pitch through repetition that seems to have caught on in some circles, including social media, where the concept was first pitched, according to the author.¹

The author centres herself and her work in the introduction. It begins with acknowledging the ancient ones² and then notes a move “away from the standard format of academic-focused referencing of previous external work or thought, this book instead draws from living examples of current leadership...”³ This is not entirely accurate, as can be seen in the endnotes, which are rife with a wide-ranging use of previous external work. One result is that the author shares ideas that have already been published without acknowledging those sources, which she must be unaware of, and ignoring the good work done by so many, including Indigenous scholars, who arguably offer “internal” work “in relation to the growth of the Indigenous economy”.⁴ For example, in the section entitled “The Risk of Doing Nothing”,⁵ the author raises the important point that the cost of doing nothing to support the Indigenous economy is enormous. This idea was first captured in the first edition of the *Cando Journal of Aboriginal Economic Development* in 1999, when the bold message and challenge to action made by Charlie Coffey, RBC Executive Vice-President, Business Banking, aimed full-bore at Canada’s corporate sector in a presentation made to an international audience.⁶ It is a message that continues to deserve the attention given to it in this book.

This book is not about Indigenous economic development per se. It is about making a case for “taking a seat at the economic table”. She argues for a goal of developing a \$100 billion Indigenous economy from its current \$32 billion in five years. It’s a bold goal and one that deserves some attention. The argument presented stresses differences and the very poor track record of the Canadian government in supporting Indigenous community economic development. She argues for the development of a complex set of development

¹ Brett Dolter, “Sustainable Inclusive Development”, *Alternatives Journal*, (2017) 43(1): 56. Available at ProQuest Document Preview, <https://www.proquest.com/openview/423bcf5052478a0a21db7941ea950a91/1?pq-origsite=gscholar&cbl=35934>

² C.A. Hilton, *Indigenomics: Taking a Seat at the Economic Table* (Gabriola Island, BC: New Society Publishers, 2021), p. 1.

³ Hilton, p. 5.

⁴ Hilton, p. 5.

⁵ Hilton, p. 154.

⁶ Charles Coffey, “The Cost of Doing Nothing: A Call to Action”, *The Journal of Aboriginal Economic Development*, (1999) 1(1): 127.

activities, almost all of which have been brought forward by the 1996 Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, the Harvard Project on Indian Economic Development, and other development advocates over the last thirty years. The strength of her work is its conception of Indigenous strength and action as the basis for future action. It is an attempt to provide a conceptual framework for what is normatively framed as Indigenous economic development.

The book is readable, and the author makes the subject matter accessible to a broad audience with potential interest for grassroots community developers, university undergraduate students, policymakers, and the corporate sector. The author's selection of leaders who are interviewed captures the positive dynamism gifted to those who work in this field. These leaders are clear thinkers with a consistent clarion call: the time is now to move on realizing commercial economic power and making an important contribution to this work. The impressive array of experience includes several resource sector specialists, a bridge builder on major developments, an Indigenous knowledge advocate, a developer/management consultant, and a financial value creator. The leadership in many communities commonly says that they support development, but they need to be meaningful partners in a respectful and inclusive economy.

Numerous concepts are introduced that are excellent springboards for fruitful discussion in university faculties across the country, with the proviso that instructors be well-versed in the area to encourage meaningful critical dialogue. The author offers the concept of the Indigenous Economics Mix as integral to a strategy to continue growing the Indigenous economy to \$100 billion. Development strategists would see this as an important aspect of any economy's development: don't put all your eggs in one basket. Diversify. And build on your strengths. This mix defines an Indigenous economy built from a wide variety of actions: equity ownership, capital, entrepreneurship, trade, philanthropy, procurement, clean energy, technology, social finance, investment, commerce, and infrastructure.⁷ An important challenge for designing such an economy comes from tracking economic growth towards a target from an Indigenous economic strength baseline. Accurate growth forecasting will also be critical to managing a very necessary shift in the Canadian–Indigenous economic relationship, which includes the Indigenous Economics Mix.⁸ The author sets the stage for growing the Indigenous economy with this “modern, constructive economic design”. We wonder about the Indigenous foundations underpinning Indigenomics when all of the development tools look like those used in modern capitalist economies. Is there a role for one of the most important desires of modern Indigenous society: Indigenous knowledge and its value set?

The book raises numerous discussion points. A target of \$100 billion for a future Indigenous economy seems to have come out of the blue. What is the rationale for a \$100 billion target and not \$200 billion or more? A major focus of the book is the damage that the Indian Act has wrought, which very understandably continues. I have a close affinity with a quotation that says, “Teach Indigenous brilliance and success as much as you teach Indigenous suffering and trauma.”⁹ The incredible brilliance of economic tenacity and resilience in the face of the Indian Act and many more traumas suffered by Indigenous peoples is unfortunately

⁷ Hilton, p. 158.

⁸ Hilton, p. 170.

⁹ Indigenous Values Initiative, *Reminder*, Facebook (October 1, 2020), <https://www.facebook.com/indigenousvalues/photos/a.1955819574654955/2836851946551709/?type=3>

overshadowed by the emphasis on the Indian Act here. The history of Indigenous economic agency is downplayed here, and so the question arises: can a reasonable discussion of a \$100 billion target miss a grounding in the rich economic history engraved on our nations that offers a large part of the necessary foundation for such an undertaking? How did and do the incredible success stories listed in the book thrive despite the Indian Act? Wuttunee recalls asking a leader in the Atlantic Policy Congress of First Nation Chiefs Secretariat, “So what about the Indian Act?” His response was, “What Indian Act?” That was 20 years ago, and there were similar sentiments shared by Tsuut’ina Nation leadership in the early 1990s. The vision of many of our leaders has never been passive in the face of obstacles.

Other questions that come to mind and that were shared by our colleagues include the following: Is the discussion here complete without considering whether the Indigenous economy is to be separate and apart or to be interwoven into the mainstream economy with values intact? What is an appropriate rate of return if profit maximization is no longer the goal? What targets for continued state funding (if it should continue) and bank financing are appropriate in the new, modern Indigenous economy? Can true sovereignty exist beyond own-source funding that continues to include state transfer payments? Is this book really a thinly disguised polemic? Why are the noticeable shifts in world priorities around climate change and the environment not acknowledged in the very polarized tables in Chapter 1 on a western world view? Why is there only one seat at the economic table and not more? Why is there only one economic table and not many? Why is science portrayed as static here? Is that reasonable, given modern views of science? If equal attention is not given to brilliant and distinct Métis and Inuit values in their economic development, is the proper term “Indigenomics” or First Nation-nomics? How applicable is the discussion of values that focuses narrowly on the author’s personal history? Can a \$100 billion target be achieved outside of resource development, which is often contrary to Indigenous values but lies at the heart of much of the discussion of the experts who are interviewed here for the future of the Indigenous economy in Canada? Are communities permitted to exercise their sovereignty by pursuing resource development on their lands in the new tomorrow? Would they, or should they, be banished from inclusion in the Indigenous economy? On the face of it, the design and the Indigenous Economics Mix elements presented here are not new. How could they be reinvigorated and bring new dimensions to understanding the Indigenous economy?

At its heart, *Indigenomics* is not a challenge to the Canadian economic system and its foundation but an argument for inclusion in it. It does not offer a reasoned critique of the political-economic system that created the exclusion of Indigenous peoples or offer the alternative efforts that Indigenous economic and business leaders are bringing to the table. Perhaps all of these are part of the Indigenous economic mix, and *Indigenomics* is wide enough in its conception to include them?

Some of the best resources we used in the university courses we taught brought up important discussion questions, such as those noted here. The economic leader interviews and the catalysts for discussion are the most attractive features of this book, making it a very intriguing addition to the conversation. This book makes an important but flawed contribution to the ongoing discussion about Indigenous economic development. It can be a source of ideas for those who work diligently and with good intent in this arena. For others, it raises alarm bells about the direction of Indigenous developments.