

STEPPING INTO THE RIVER  
*Learnings from Simon Fraser University  
Community Economic Development's Economic  
Reconciliation Framework Development*

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## INTRODUCTION

This reflection paper captures the learnings of Simon Fraser University's Community Economic Development (SFU CED) team. In Fall of 2019, we embarked on the process of creating a framework for economic reconciliation for British Columbia. The framework report documents a year's worth of learnings from convening with Indigenous thought leaders and practitioners in the economic sector across BC. It is both a snapshot of the current state of economic reconciliation, which includes participants' perspectives and experiences with non-Indigenous individuals and institutions, along with a vision for transforming the current economy. In order for reconciliation to be meaningful and truly transformative, it requires that non-Indigenous people see economic reconciliation as not only about changing relationships to Indigenous people alone, but rather completely reforming the economy by adopting Indigenous principles and wisdom.

As was brought up in our convenings, economic reconciliation is a journey, not an endpoint, and our actions need to start reflecting ongoing commitment to being in right relation-

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*Journal of Aboriginal Economic Development* 2022, 12(2), 23; <https://doi.org/10.54056/PDNO6448>

ship with one another. Rather than providing a blueprint to a “finish line”, our framework invites readers to think of the economic reconciliation journey as being in a river. In a river, one is supported by the foundation of the riverbed, and yet open to the course and pace that the water is flowing. There are many stones to step on and move between, and any move we take has the capacity to create ripples of impact that surge through our communities. To be in the river is therefore to both welcome change and be part of the change.

### **A Note on Voice**

This piece is written from multiple perspectives. Some reflections will be unique to Sxwpilemaát Siyám (Chief Leanne Joe), whereas others will be unique to Lily Raphael. Otherwise, the writers use “we” to speak of the team’s collective experience in implementing this work.

## **WHAT WE DID**

From the outset, this work has been grounded in the intention of exploring the elements of a future economy that is meaningful for reconciliation, centring the development of the framework in experiences, worldviews, and aspirations of Indigenous peoples across British Columbia. Our process consisted of a year of deep engagement to better understand and represent Indigenous views on economic reconciliation. This process consisted of generative dialogues with many Indigenous thought leaders and practitioners, as well as non-Indigenous individuals representing Indigenous-led organizations, across British Columbia. Stemming from the commitment to righting the historical wrongs of colonialism, and centring Indigenous ways of being and Indigenous economies, this work has been based on engagement with Indigenous leadership in the economic development sector.

Our dialogue sessions during 2020 included the following:

- **What Is Economic Reconciliation?**
- **The Role of Women and Matriarchs in Economic Reconciliation**  
Rematriation in relation to leadership, governance, and traditional laws and teachings, and the role of women in the new economy.
- **Traditional Governance Structures and Economies**  
Looking at how First Nations are balancing modern and traditional governance and economic development and influencing the transformation of a new economic system (GDP alternative = Local Well-Being Driven Economies).
- **Economic Reconciliation and Non-Indigenous Stakeholders**  
Identifying actions that need to be taken by non-Indigenous residents, municipalities, and regions to engage in economic reconciliation.
- **Cross-Provincial and Regional Collaboration**  
How do we make advances together for Economic Reconciliation? How do we remove the silos and work collaboratively for the collective benefits of Indigenous communities and future generations?

- **Mapping the Ecosystem of Economic Reconciliation Actors and Initiatives**
- **Investment Readiness for Indigenous Communities**

The SFU CED team also internally reflected on this work constantly. Sxwpilemaát Siyám wrote articles alongside this process, through SFU CED's blog series Transformative Stories (<https://www.sfu.ca/ced/economic-reconciliation/transformative-storytelling.html>).

## LEARNINGS AND REFLECTIONS

### **There is no singular definition of economic reconciliation**

While it is not necessarily surprising that there is no consensus on how to define economic reconciliation in a province that overlaps with 204 First Nations, hearing this message over and over had a significant impact in how the framework took shape.

At the same time that economic reconciliation is multi-dimensional, there is a need to distinguish between superficial or token acts of reconciliation and more meaningful or deeper forms of it. Attempting to find that definitive line is challenging because reconciliation is so contextual. A major component of this work has always been to advocate for reconciliation at the local or regional level, according to First Nations' and Indigenous peoples' cultural knowings. It is therefore impossible for the framework to affect transformation on its own, given that reconciliation is largely about the organic and emergent nature of relationship-building between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples and communities.

### **The Role of SFU CED?**

During our engagement sessions, some tension arose around the role of SFU CED in facilitating these dialogues and working towards economic reconciliation. There were questions raised about how the outward, community-facing focus of SFU CED's economic reconciliation initiative related to SFU's larger commitments to reconciliation and decolonization as a colonial institution. Though this has not always been the case, our program has become more active in internal conversations on SFU's reconciliation journey over time, and we recognize that there is more work to be done.

### **Change or Transformation?**

An ongoing question for SFU CED is whether First Nations' goals are mostly centred around wanting to participate in the larger dominant economy, or do they want the economic system to shift? Do they want to directly influence the economic space through an Indigenous lens and from the perspective of an Indigenous worldview and knowledge framework? In asking these questions, quite directly, without some additional space for curiosity and visioning, there was a notable difference in experiences of what Indigenous stakeholders are wanting for their economies, reconciliation, development, and so on. Thus, at that time, not every convening participant had a clear answer to these questions.

At the local level, Indigenous people, leaders, and practitioners have to confront the lack of knowledge, tensions, tokenizing, and racism that happens in their day-to-day work.

Practitioners working on the ground are directly affected by current procedures and dynamics between non-Indigenous and Indigenous players regionally. Amidst that dynamic, we recognize that each First Nation community is trying to get the most out of the current economic system to meet current community needs, which are generally overwhelming, and these on-going responsibilities keep leadership and community from larger and longer-term visioning. Our convening dialogues revealed that there is a need for on-going space to ask these questions not only at a national and provincial level or in an academic context, but also at the local practitioner level, and we hope to continue to be a part of creating those spaces for visioning across these different scales and contexts.

## Multiple Voices, Multiple Audiences

### *Writing as Women of Colour*

In the written framework, we openly and honestly share the challenge of engaging in this work as women of colour. Since efforts and expressions of reconciliation, decolonization, equity, and “inclusion” have often been token acts, it was difficult to remain hopeful that this process would bring small or incremental change, let alone catalyze any significant transformation. The emotional labour of writing on these topics has not been an easy task, especially during a time when so many injustices, acts of violence and racism, and destruction have been laid bare and in need of grieving. As much as we invite the readers to welcome their own discomfort in going through this document, we also had to confront our own discomfort and challenges in the process of writing it. For the work of Reconciliation to be real, deep, and transformative, we have learned that we need spaces for grieving and discomfort as part of healing and forgiveness.

### *Who is the framework written to and for?*

In particular, it was challenging to arrive at a decision about who this framework would be for. It was difficult to address multiple audiences, as our readers would be Indigenous individuals with different life experiences, community needs and relationship priorities, along with non-Indigenous individuals with varying levels of literacy and familiarity with settler colonialism in Canada, Indigenization, decolonization and reconciliation. This meant that we wanted to honour what our participants shared, which required commitment to truth-telling about Canadian history and what economic reconciliation currently looks like from the perspective of First Nations economic development practitioners and thought leaders. On the other hand, we needed to make the framework inviting and accessible to non-Indigenous readers who may not have much knowledge or understanding of things like reconciliation, the role and governance structure of First Nations, ongoing inequities and injustices experienced by Indigenous peoples in Canada, the value in partnering with Indigenous Nations and entities, how to build trust and/or heal from mistrust, and so forth.

Having primarily only engaged with individuals from Indigenous-led organizations and initiatives during our convenings, we later realized that we did not know whether what we have shared would align with the capacities and readiness of non-Indigenous practitioners to commit to deeper economic reconciliation initiatives. However, we also did not want to write in a way that would reinforce tokenizing or box-ticking practices of non-Indigenous entities. Whereas many resources for practitioners come in the form of guidebooks or toolkits, our commitment to encouraging regionally based reconciliation grounded in unique

cultural frameworks of each First Nation meant that we wanted to move away from the tendency to provide prescriptive recommendations. Instead, it was our goal to write in a purposeful decolonized way that requires larger shifts in mindsets for practitioners, leaders and organizations, which non-Indigenous readers may not have as much comfort level in reading. But being uncomfortable is a necessary part of transformation. This was no easy task, as it is hard to write and translate the Indigenous worldview. Wisdom can easily get lost in translation when needing to be expressed in a western format such as a compartmentalized and highly structured report written in the English language.

### *Enacting Two-Eyed Seeing*

In Elder Albert Marshall's words, Two-Eyed Seeing means: "To see from one eye with the strengths of Indigenous ways of knowing, and to see from the other eye with the strengths of Western ways of knowing, and to use both of these eyes together" (Bartlett, Marshall & Marshall, 2012, p. 335). The Two-Eyed Seeing approach has been advocated for use in research with Indigenous people, as it creates a space for Indigenous and Western ways of knowing to come together using the best of both worldviews to support understanding and solve problems. Although its application is widely found in environmental conservation and stewardship efforts, it has been challenging to grasp what that actually looks like in practice, as it pertains to the economic sector. Similar to reconciliation efforts, it can be challenging to discern when genuine Two-Eyed Seeing is taking place, as opposed to attempting to retrofit a pre-existing Western structure or process with Indigenous knowledge or input. In thinking about Reconciliation as a process that leads to transformation, Two-Eyed Seeing seems required for the space it provides for co-creation.

Two-eyed seeing has been helpful in shaping the initial path of this initiative, one in which we are committed and accountable to Indigenous communities and worldviews while supporting a shift in non-Indigenous mindsets and actions. While it is still yet to be determined how this framework will be received and utilized, let alone to what extent it will be transformative, we look forward to capturing those insights so that our work can evolve based on greater input.

### *Are Frameworks Useful?*

A question that remains present for us is whether or not frameworks are effective. Institution-based professions seem to draw on frameworks as a way to shape and guide their particular work, providing some parameters and constraints that are undoubtedly helpful in focusing and prioritizing organizational efforts. And yet, when shared in reports and plans, frameworks can appear clunky, dense, and like they are attempting to oversimplify the highly complex, messy, and interconnected reality of the work. Each of the writers has some additional thoughts below on the effectiveness of frameworks and their colonial nature.

#### ■ *Sxwpilemaát Siyám*

The colonial nature and effectiveness of "frameworks" was always especially challenging for me, as they can be overly prescriptive and don't leave a lot of room for fluidity and space for curiosity, questioning, sharing, etc. Many times, I stated that if we were in "ceremony", you would just witness all of what I was trying to achieve in the writing of this economic reconciliation framework document. There is so much that cannot be encapsulated in just "words alone" in a document ... you have to see it, feel it, hear it, and be a part of it, to

truly “know”. Only in ceremony would one grasp the depth, complexity, and interconnectedness of our culture, language, governance, worldview, teachings, etc. Another way of teaching, learning, and sharing in our cultures is through storytelling, songs, and doing things on the land together. These ways provide an open and fluid space for interpretation, based on context, the teachers and learners, and where you were.

### ■ Lily Raphael

The online Cambridge Dictionary offers the following definition of framework: “a system of rules, ideas, or beliefs that is used to plan or decide something”. While it is in our nature as humans to come up with different ways to create meaning around our existence, and in our complex social systems we inevitably come up with frameworks that guide our way of being in the world, there is something about the way in which we use frameworks in an institutional setting that seems to flatten and diminish learning from experience and from being in relationship to one another. Perhaps it is the way in which they are visualized, which can be useful in helping to make sense of highly complex systems, but risky in attempting to reduce the act of navigating complexity to a neat and orderly step-by-step process. In this way, frameworks may risk reinforcing box-ticking behaviour, when really what is needed is more of an embrace of uncertainty, and more space to imagine other possible realities beyond what our current system provides.

Although the final product is called a Framework for Economic Reconciliation, we are open to the possibility that this is not actually a framework. If being called a framework comes with the expectation that we provide a clear and definitive blueprint for how to engage in truth-telling, healing, relationship-building, and repair, then surely this framework will not be useful. This is why we have likened commitment to economic reconciliation to being in a flowing river. To be in a river is to allow oneself to be transformed, which is what is needed for deep, meaningful reconciliation to occur.

## WHAT WOULD WE DO DIFFERENTLY?

Ideal circumstances would be to be able to do this work in ceremony. SFU CED would start with an institutional ceremony, in which university leadership would grasp the richness and depth of this work, sharing wealth, knowledge, culture, and who we are. “The work” is in ceremony, and doing it with university leadership would help to lay the groundwork for institutional support.

If given the opportunity under non-pandemic circumstances, we would also spend more time in communities across the territories. We would connect with First Nations communities and practitioners to understand their experiences, aspirations, and requirements in order for economic reconciliation to support their sovereignty. Similarly, we would connect with non-Indigenous neighbours and get a feel for what level of readiness they currently have in order to engage in economic reconciliation. If appropriate, we would also consider the opportunity to host feasts in the communities with both Indigenous and non-Indigenous stakeholders. Through feasting and in ceremony, partners could decide together what the journey will look like.

At the onset of the pandemic, community leadership and practitioners were in need of prioritizing response and recovery measures for their communities, and our dialogues were

understandably not a high priority at that time. With the uncertainty that came at the beginning of the pandemic with regard to travel and in-person engagements, we were slow to react and pivot our community engagement approach. If we could re-design our approach, we would have redirected resources for more interviews or focus groups, in which we could also provide more time and space for co-creation and visioning activities in order to welcome individuals into the head and heart space of transformation.

We learned quite a lot from this process, and it has given us the chance to understand what we can do differently for next steps.

## WHERE TO NEXT?

As we wrap up this phase of our process, we have some questions that remain:

- How can we catalyze or accelerate the steps needed to get to relationship-building?
- How can we support smaller communities in reducing Indian Act dependency, through good governance and sovereignty building?
- What do First Nations envision for their own communities? How does this affect their ability to answer the questions posed in the framework?
- How does change happen with regard to shifting commitment levels of non-Indigenous actors? What's it going to take?
- How will non-Indigenous stakeholders be held accountable for their commitments to economic reconciliation?

As we move into the next phase of this work, we hope to move towards action co-research.

- **Educate and enable local municipalities and other entities in the economic development sector to engage in economic reconciliation.** Mayors, councils, economic development officers, property owners, and business leaders all need a higher “Reconciliation IQ” to develop the relationships necessary for healing, planning, and development with their Indigenous neighbours. To do so, they need access to Indigenous perspectives on economic reconciliation, tools for personal and community-based change, and case studies to spark ideas and innovations.
- **Test, learn about, and communicate successful approaches to community based economic reconciliation through practitioner-based research.** It is critically important that new work be done in economic reconciliation, and for the learnings to be shared across communities. For us, engagement, direct practice, and storytelling led by grassroots Indigenous leaders are the essence of “research” and can be more insightful than typically dissociated forms of academic research. So this project will seek to increase the opportunities for, and wider acceptance of, applied practitioner-based research.
- **Rematriate economic reconciliation thinking and planning.** Traditionally, women were the leaders in Indigenous societies. In economic reconciliation we are committed to recentring Indigenous women in the work of leading and communicating social change.

This means creating more opportunities for their work, increasing their economic development capacities, and amplifying their voices.

We hope to continue to identify places where connections could be strengthened. Economic reconciliation is a collective effort, and it's going to take all of us.