



INDIGENOUS PHYSICIANS' ASSOCIATION OF CANADA

BILL S-5 ROUNDTABLES

WHAT WE HEARD REPORT

May 16, 2024

Prepared by



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The project team would like to extend our deepest gratitude to all the participants who generously shared their insights, experiences, and wisdom during the Bill S-5 IPAC Member Roundtables.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The Firelight Group (Firelight) supported the Indigenous Physicians Association of Canada (IPAC) during the recent IPAC member roundtables on Bill S-5, Strengthening Environmental Protection for a Healthier Canada Act. This *What We Heard Report* provides a thematic overview of the discussions that took place during these virtual roundtables.

1.1 BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

1.1.1 Indigenous Physicians Association of Canada (IPAC)

IPAC is an association dedicated to providing knowledge and support for communities, national Indigenous organizations, and healthcare providers. It serves as an advocate for Indigenous peoples' health and acts as a support mechanism for Indigenous physicians and students. Recognizing the health inequities faced by Indigenous communities, IPAC acknowledges its role as contemporary medicine people. They believe it is their responsibility and right to come together to improve the physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual health of Indigenous peoples and to address the determinants of Indigenous health.¹

1.1.2 Bill S-5, Strengthening Environmental Protection for a Healthier Canada Act

On June 13, 2023, Bill S-5, Strengthening Environmental Protection for a Healthier Canada Act became law. This bill is an amendment to the Canadian Environmental Protection Act (CEPA) to, among other things, recognize that every individual in Canada has the right to a healthy environment. The federal government has two years to create an implementation framework in consultation with Indigenous Peoples. IPAC coordinated three projects – funded by a grant from Environment and Climate Change Canada – with the goal of collecting as many voices as possible. This includes a Bill S-5 IPAC Member Survey, Bill S-5 Elder Gathering, and Bill S-5 IPAC Member Roundtables, further described below.

1.2 IPAC MEMBER ROUNDTABLES

Two ~1.5hr virtual roundtables were hosted by IPAC on April 24-25, 2024 as an open opportunity for all IPAC members to come together and share their insights, experiences, and knowledge, as well as ask questions related to Bill S-5. A total of 7 IPAC members were present at the roundtables. The roundtables were hosted by Melanie Osmack, IPAC Acting Director, and notetaking was completed by Katelyn Knott, a Firelight staff member.

2. WHAT WE HEARD

Section 2 of this report is organized thematically to effectively summarize the information and insights that were shared during the roundtables. It should be noted that the themes that are outlined below do not follow a specific hierarchical order (i.e., they are not in order of importance or relevance), which is reflective of Indigenous worldviews that agree that everything on earth is connected, interrelated, and equal.

¹ *About Us*. Indigenous Physicians Association of Canada (IPAC). (2024). <https://ipacamic.ca/about-us/our-vision-missions-beliefs-and-values/>

2.1 TRADITIONAL USE OF LAND

A common theme shared among participants is the wisdom imparted by Elders in their communities, emphasizing the responsibility to interact with the land as a relative. This perspective mandates that individuals take on stewardship roles to protect the land. A fundamental belief in Indigenous cultures is that the land transcends mere property; it is not an inanimate object but rather a living entity that encompasses culture, relationships, ecosystems, spirituality, and law. As a result, discussions about health are inseparable from consideration of the land's well-being.

2.1.1 Ceremony

Ceremonies play a crucial role in the well-being of individuals, communities, and the land, as highlighted by participants. In northern regions, participants discussed how ceremonies serve as reminders for people of their duty to care for the earth, which includes but is not limited to the land and animals. For instance, in Treaty 7 territory, there is an ongoing initiative to restore the buffalo population, recognizing that their health is interconnected with the health of the people and the land.

Coastal communities conduct salmon ceremonies where Elders pass down traditional teachings to the youth. These ceremonies underscore the vital relationship between people and animals and translate into practical skills, essential for surviving and thriving in coastal territories.

Further discussions revealed sustainable practices around ceremonial lodges, constructed from trees that have naturally fallen rather than cutting down living trees. Participants explained that once a lodge collapses, it signifies it is time to decompose back into the earth, marking a natural cycle of renewal and teaching about the rhythms of nature and life. Such teachings provide opportunities for younger generations to learn about wellness, both personal and environmental.

Participants unanimously agreed on the importance of maintaining this way of life and knowledge. They recognized that this cultural heritage influences all aspects of life and is essential for educating younger generations about the importance of environmental stewardship, expressed through language and ceremony.

2.1.2 Access

Many participants emphasized the importance of traditional values and teachings related to land use that have been instilled in them. These teachings advocate for sustainable practices, such as only taking what is needed, which often stands in stark contrast to Western or colonial approaches to land, which are capitalist and extraction-based. Unfortunately, colonialism continues to significantly impact Indigenous communities and the land through resource extraction activities, often justified as economic development. This often leaves communities impoverished and with limited options for sustainable living conditions.

One participant recounted their experience of living on a reserve, which had a location that grew traditional plants and medicines. Tragically, without proper consultation with Elders and Knowledge Keepers from that community, this land was leased for cattle ranching to support the community's overall economic health. Consequently, the medicinal plants stopped growing in that area, eliminating access to crucial traditional resources. Furthermore, participants spoke about how the CO₂ emissions from the cattle negatively impacted the air quality for those living in the vicinity. There is a strong desire among participants for the reintroduction and proliferation of native plant species to mitigate the carbon emissions from agricultural lands.

One participant discussed the health consequences to their community due to being a landless reserve as a result of displacement by mining operations and paper mills. Participants used the term “environmental racism” to highlight the injustices done to their communities. This kind of environmental racism has led to compromised food sources and has forced many Indigenous people to relocate closer to urban areas, seeking better access to essential resources and escaping the toxic effects of corporate exploitation on their ancestral lands.

The participants voiced concerns about the future of the land and its condition for upcoming generations. One participant shared their child’s decision against having children due to current global and environmental issues.

2.1.3 Land Based Learning

Participants expressed that reconnecting with, or “bringing everything back to the land,” is the solution to improving the overall health and wellbeing of individuals. One participant suggested that land-based education should be integrated into all aspects of learning as policies related to Equity, Diversity, Inclusion, and Accessibility (EDIA) are implemented across educational institutions.

Another example that was shared was the concept of “Tree School,” where school-aged children attend classes outdoors in all seasons. Although this is a non-Indigenous initiative, the participant shared that this school is very open to embracing and incorporating Indigenous culture into their programming. This includes facilitating and celebrating ceremonies such as strawberry and water ceremonies, which teach that all life is deserving of respect and that everything is interconnected. Having children learn these lessons at such a young age can help to lay a strong foundation for future generations to nurture a deeper respect and care for the land and each other.

2.2 CHILDREN AND YOUTH

Participants working in pediatrics shared insights that they gained from observing trends within their pediatric units, believing that the health of children mirrors the overall health of their environment. They noted that happy children are generally indicative of a supportive household environment that promotes outdoor activities such as climbing trees and enjoying the sun and fresh air. This also reflects the ability of older, more elder generations to support and nurture the development of their grandchildren, often by engaging them with nature.

One participant highlighted the success of the Environmental Lead Program in their community. This program involved testing the lead levels in children’s blood, providing irrefutable evidence of environmental health risks. This data was particularly compelling because the children’s young age and limited exposure outside their community meant that the high lead levels could not be attributed to external factors.

However, other participants expressed their concerns about the changing environmental conditions impacting children’s safety outdoors. They pointed to increasing threats from wildfires, encroaching wildlife, feral animals, and gang activity, which collectively can hinder children’s ability to safely enjoy outdoor experiences.

2.3 CONSULTATION

During the roundtable discussions, consultation emerged as a critical issue directly linked to Indigenous health and environmental stewardship. Participants stressed the importance of not

only involving Indigenous people in consultations but also ensuring that the right individuals – those with deep knowledge of the land and its value – are engaged. There were concerns among participants who felt as though certain people are selectively consulted, knowing that they will approve resource extraction projects. It was also brought up that the fines imposed on corporations are often not substantial enough to deter improper disposal practices; it is cheaper for them to pay the “penalty” than to comply with proper waste disposal regulations.

2.3.1 Building Trust

Many participants agreed that there needs to be some form of accountability mechanism to monitor how well companies and organizations uphold their commitments made during consultations. Indigenous perspectives often differ significantly from those of colonial entities, highlighting the necessity for robust accountability measures. This is crucial, as Indigenous nations typically lack the financial resources to effectively challenge government legislation and policies.

Participants also noted that their communities frequently feel sidelined in the consultation process, treated as afterthoughts rather than primary stakeholders. For consultation to be truly effective, it must go beyond mere procedural formalities (such as checking a box) and adopt a “two-eyed seeing” approach, which emphasizes the equal importance of both Indigenous and Western views to obtain a more comprehensive understanding of the environment. Participants noted that often only select aspects of Indigenous knowledge that conveniently align with Western paradigms are embraced. Moreover, clear communication about the potential impacts of projects on communities is essential for building trust, according to participants. One participant expressed frustration over repeated discussions with various organizations that ultimately lead to no substantive change.

2.3.2 Reducing the Burden of Consultation

While all participants agreed that a better approach to consultation is needed, they also acknowledged the demanding nature of the process, which often strains already limited community resources. One suggestion was to create paid positions within communities, akin to a board of directors, to ensure that governments and businesses remain accountable for their promises and commitments. Such a structure would not only respect and value the contributions of these community members but would also provide them with the necessary financial support as living costs continue to rise.

2.4 NON-REGRESSION

The topic of non-regression during the roundtables sparked significant debate and raised many questions among participants. One participant asked about the criteria or metrics used to evaluate non-regression, voicing concerns about trust, particularly regarding how data collection and testing stops when results do not meet expectations. The example of Covid-19 was used to drive this point home. While we still have cases of Covid-19 in Canada and across the world, testing has come to a halt to “move forward” in life.

Furthermore, participants discussed the baseline standards for health assessments, expressing concerns that government benchmarks often prioritize the health standards of the majority population over those of Indigenous populations. This led to an in-depth discussion on the interplay between subjectivity and objectivity in research.

2.4.1 *Subjectivity versus Objectivity*

Participants noted the difficulty in assessing non-regression due to the varied realities across the country. While colonial governments seek objective measures to ensure consistency, Indigenous perspectives often view subjectivity as more reflective of reality. This difference in viewpoint makes navigating assessments challenging, as participants feel they must manipulate the system to achieve favorable outcomes.

2.4.2 *Community-Based Standards*

It was emphasized by participants that adopting a pan-Indigenous approach to health and well-being assessments is inappropriate due to the diverse environmental conditions and contaminant levels across different regions. Participants highlighted the challenges that Indigenous communities face in prioritizing their needs and returning to healthy, safe environments amidst competing demands. Financial constraints further complicate these efforts, making it difficult for individuals and communities to focus on healing themselves, let alone their broader environment.

3. CONCLUSION

As a concluding thought, a story was shared by a participant about their grandmother, a residential school survivor, as an example of how to work towards healthier environments on this land. This participant shared that her grandmother is a part of a group of survivors who call themselves the 'Children of Shingwauk'. The Shingwauk Residential School was in operation from 1878 to 1970 in Sault Ste. Marie, ON. This former school is now home to Algoma University College, as well as the Shingwauk Project Residential School Archive and Research Centre.²

The survivors requested to have the Algoma University College auditorium decommissioned and put it in the care of the Children of Shingwauk. While non-survivors may not understand the significance of the auditorium, it was the one place where the residential school children could see and interact with their siblings and other family members, whom they had been otherwise separated from seeing in the school.

Ultimately, the participant shared that the lesson learned here is to recognize who the right people are to properly care for the land – those who understand the history and know the stories behind this inherent responsibility. Participants recognize that returning land is more complicated than returning an auditorium, but the principles are the same. The ideal way to ensure everyone has access to a healthy environment is by putting the land back in the hands of the original caretakers.

² *Shingwauk (Wawanosh)*. National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation (NCTR). (2023, July 11). <https://nctr.ca/residential-schools/ontario/shingwauk-wawanosh/>