

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:

## ALIGNING ENGO FINANCIAL PRACTICES WITH COMMITMENTS TO INDIGENOUS-LED CONSERVATION

### WHY THIS PROJECT MATTERS

Indigenous Peoples have always been the original stewards of the land, upholding knowledge and governance systems essential for sustaining biodiversity and addressing the climate crisis. Yet, despite this leadership, they receive only a fraction of conservation funding. In the lands known as Canada, Indigenous Peoples (First Nations, Inuit and Métis) are 5% of the population but receive less than 1% of major charitable grants—a stark inequity that undermines efforts to protect lands and waters and advance reconciliation.

Environmental Non-Governmental Organizations (ENGOS) play a critical role in responding to the biodiversity and climate crises, and have made significant commitments to reconciliation. Many have embedded Indigenous-led conservation into their mission statements and strategic plans, and increasingly engage in providing technical support and collaborating on strategic partnerships with Indigenous Peoples and Nations. However, organizational financial practices often lag behind these commitments, creating gaps that hold inequities and colonial relations in place, and may not fully uphold Indigenous governance and self-determination. At a deeper level, there remain significant divergences between the worldview of mainstream environmentalism and those of Indigenous Peoples. This research is part of wider efforts to bring more awareness to these differing worldviews, which in turn can create the basis for respectful relationships, improved financial practices and even new economic understandings that could support systemic solutions to the biodiversity and climate crises.

### INTENDED OUTCOMES

This research set out to inform and guide ENGOS and funders on how to better align financial practices with their commitments to reconciliation. To do this we wanted to get an understanding of the current state of financial practices in the sector, identify gaps between funding and commitments, engage in reflexive discussions on how to move forward, and share promising practices and practical guidance for embedding reconciliation into financial decision-making.

**"Financial practices" refers to activities and policies that help your organization decide how its funding is obtained and allocated, and includes financial and administrative relationships with different Indigenous Peoples, partners or communities. Common activities include financial planning, budgeting, record-keeping, fund management, internal controls, and financial reporting.**



## HOW THIS PROJECT WAS CONDUCTED

EcoAnalytics (environmental research collective), RAD Network (Indigenous-led network focused on nature finance and conservation economy), and Environics Research (market research consultancy) teamed up to carry out a qualitative study that included:

- a literature review of sector reports, articles, and resources to understand best practices for better financial alignment;
- a qualitative survey of ten ENGOs to understand current practices and barriers to further alignment;
- a focus group discussion with seven ENGOs to understand opportunities and emerging practices;
- a learning session to share our findings and facilitate ideation on next steps with approximately 100 participants, including a mix of representatives from non-Indigenous organizations, Indigenous organizations, and funders.

All project phases were carried out using reflexive and collaborative processes, ensuring our methods emphasized co-learning and relationship-building—two values that are at the heart of this work.

## WHAT WE LEARNED

Environmental Non Government Organizations (ENGOs) across Canada are committed to supporting Indigenous-led conservation. This commitment is reflected in a variety of ways including mission statements, partnerships, and strategic plans. However, the depth and consistency of inclusive and equitable financial practices aligned with Indigenous leadership vary widely across organizations.

### **Indigenous Leadership integration needs more focus and meaningful inclusion.**

While many ENGOs engage Indigenous advisors or board members, few have formal structures like Indigenous specific units. Recruiting and retaining Indigenous staff remains a significant challenge, limiting the ability to uplift Indigenous leadership and ways of knowing across programs.

### **In-kind support is core but evolving.**

In-kind support, such as providing legal services, technical assistance, and grant writing free of charge, is the most common way ENGOs support Indigenous partners. Organizations are increasingly reflecting on how to shift from direct service provision toward long-term capacity building, including co-learning and relationship-based funding strategies.

### **Agreements and Intellectual Property require more Indigenous frameworks and ways of knowing.**

ENGOs use a mix of formal and informal agreements, with growing emphasis on co-creation and OCAP (Ownership, Control, Access, Possession) principles. Some organizations are developing innovative practices like firewalling Indigenous data and requiring written consent for knowledge use, but sector-wide models are still emerging.

### **Transparency remains a major gap.**

Few ENGOs have formal policies for sharing financial information with Indigenous partners. While some transparency exists in relational contexts, there is a clear need for more consistent and proactive practices to ensure Indigenous partners are informed about funding sources and allocations.

## **PROMISING PRACTICES**

Several innovative approaches are emerging across the sector:

- Indigenous specific and governed units, such as a fully Integrated Indigenous Unit that decides the strategic direction of the organization;
- Concrete and sustainable budget allocations (e.g., 30–50%) for Indigenous-led initiatives;
- Joint fundraising and co-application models with re-granting mechanisms;
- Compensation policies to ensure Indigenous Nations are paid when their land is used;
- Co-created agreements embedding OCAP principles and centering relational values;
- Internal data firewalls to protect Indigenous knowledge;
- Mandatory organization-wide Indigenous training.

This report highlights both the progress and the challenges in aligning ENGO financial practices with Indigenous leadership and community wisdom. Continued reflection, collaboration, and innovation will be essential to advancing relationship building opportunities with Indigenous communities, in pursuit of Reconciliation in the conservation sector. The learning event we hosted indicated a strong appetite to continue learning and sharing among ENGOs as practices evolve. To understand what your organization can do to better align its financial practices with reconciliation, we invite you to use this [reflexive Self-Assessment tool](#).