



# THE UNITED NATIONS SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS AND INDIGENOUS PEOPLES IN CANADA

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SOCIAL DETERMINANTS





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# 1.0 INTRODUCTION



In 2015, the United Nations' (UN) Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) agenda, which set targets and deadlines in eight areas with the aim of improving the lives of the world's poorest people, came to an end. They were replaced by a new, more expansive, 15-year agenda, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which seeks to eradicate poverty in all its forms and address the global challenge of sustainable development. The SDGs include issues that both low and high-income countries need to tackle to be sustainable, centered around the three pillars of sustainability: poverty eradication, economic growth and environmental protection (Gass, 2016).

The SDG agenda comes at a potential turning point for Indigenous peoples in Canada<sup>1</sup>, who have long experienced socio-economic marginalization and poorer health outcomes than non-Indigenous Canadians. It comes during a period of events that

collectively provide a promising environment for change. The 2015 election of the Liberal government, under the leadership of Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, brought a new federal mandate to strengthen “the nation-to-nation relationship with Indigenous Peoples, based on recognition of rights, respect, co-operation, and partnership” (Trudeau, 2017a). Demonstrating its commitment to a new relationship, the federal government fully endorsed, without qualifications, the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP)<sup>2</sup> in 2016, and promised to meet its international obligations under the Declaration (International Governance Innovation, 2014). These events, together with the release of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's (2015) Calls to Action, bring attention to the long-standing inequities and past injustices of Indigenous peoples and highlight the actions that must be taken to correct these, advance reconciliation, and bring about a

better quality of life for Indigenous peoples (Trudeau, 2017b). Achieving this is a responsibility of all Canadians. Within this current political climate, achieving meaningful progress on SDG targets and improving the quality of life and health outcomes for Indigenous peoples is possible.

This report aims to assess the current state of progress on SDG targets for Indigenous peoples, and suggest some ways that the SDG agenda can be used to improve socio-economic and health outcomes moving forward. It reviews peer and non-peer reviewed literature from governments, non-governmental organizations, national and international websites. This review underscores the role poverty plays in the health inequities Indigenous populations face and the need to alleviate poverty to ensure they are not left out during the period of the SDGs.

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<sup>1</sup> The terms 'Indigenous' or 'Indigenous peoples' have been used throughout this paper synonymously with the term 'Aboriginal' to encompass First Nations, Inuit and Métis peoples inclusively. The terms 'Aboriginal' or 'Aboriginal peoples' are used when reflected in the literature under discussion. Whenever possible, culturally specific names are used.

<sup>2</sup> UNDRIP, adopted by the United Nations in 2007, reinforced fundamental rights and protections of Indigenous peoples that were recognized by international law but often denied by states (Mitchell, 2014). Canada was one of four countries that voted against the declaration at that time. In 2010, the Canadian government reversed its position on UNDRIP, reaffirming its commitment to strengthening relations with Indigenous peoples of Canada. However, in 2014, as other countries moved to advance the position that states should actively engage in the implementation of UNDRIP, the Canadian government adopted a regressive position.



The report begins with a brief history of the SDGs, how they were developed, what they are, and why they are needed. It then introduces the reader to the Indigenous peoples in Canada, and provides a brief overview of the determinants that impact their health and well-being. The paper then examines the impacts of the SDGs on Indigenous peoples. Given the interconnectedness of the SDGs, this section will be organized into four themes:

- 1) socio-economic marginalization (SDGs 1, 2, 8, 9 and aspects of 10);
- 2) promotion of health and well-being (SDG 3);
- 3) equality and social inclusiveness (SDGs 4, 5, aspects of 10, 11, and 16); and
- 4) the environment (SDGs 6, 7, 13, 12, and 14).

Finally, the paper summarizes recommendations drawn from peer-reviewed articles, policy documents, and expert opinion on ways to address some of the SDG issues identified in this report that are of relevance for Indigenous peoples in Canada.



# 2.0 EVOLUTION OF THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS



The SDGs have their origins in international agreements that resulted in the establishment of the MDGs in 2000. The MDGs involved a commitment by leaders from 189 countries to improve the lives of the world's poorest people through the setting of 8 goals, 18 targets and 60 indicators, with a target achievement date of 2015 (UN Statistics Division, n.d.). These targets addressed poverty, hunger, education, gender equality, child and maternal health, infectious diseases like HIV/AIDS and malaria, the environment, and global partnerships. With the lifespan of the MDGs ending in 2015, a new framework was needed, not only to further the vision of the MDGs, but also to address new global realities, including environmental threats to the health of the planet and the fact that the majority of the poorest people live in middle-income countries (Coonrod, 2014). As such, while the MDGs primarily involved rich donor countries aiding poor recipient countries and focused on goals aimed at eradicating hunger and poverty, the SDGs expanded the scope and scale of this initiative by:

- 1) including four dimensions of sustainable development (social development, environmental sustainability, inclusive economic development, and peace and security),
- 2) providing a more comprehensive set of goals and

targets within each of the focus areas;

- 3) expanding the scope to include both rich and poor countries, and
- 4) including a framework for ensuring accountability.

Additionally, considering that Indigenous peoples make up a significant proportion of the world's poorest inhabitants, one of the most important shortcomings of the MDGs was its top-down approach and the failure to involve Indigenous peoples in identifying the issues that most affect their health and well-being, determining the goals and targets to address these issues, and establishing the most relevant indicators (International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs, 2016). The SDGs agenda process encouraged Indigenous peoples and civil groups globally to participate in all stages of the process, including consultations and discussions around formulating the agenda, development of indicators, implementation, follow-up and review of the agenda (Canadian Coalition for International Cooperation, 2016; Division for Social Policy and Development [DSPD], n.d.). Indigenous peoples highlighted the need for the new framework to have human rights and equality at its core; to endorse the fundamental concept of development of culture and identity; to focus more strongly on equality

of opportunities and outcomes (or lack thereof); and to focus on the entrenched structural factors that lead to inequality (DSPD, n.d.). This likely contributed to the expansiveness of the SDG goals.

The SDGs reflect a global shift from consumption of resources to sustainable development, in acknowledgement of the interrelationship between the environment and development (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987). Issues of concern were identified at the Rio+ 20 Summit in Rio de Janeiro Brazil in the summer of 2012. The conference identified poverty as the greatest challenge to sustainable development, as well as other global concerns like hunger, gender inequality, the socio-economic capacity of states, and environmental conservation (Canadian Council for International Cooperation, 2016; UN General Assembly, 2012). The conference highlighted the need to integrate economic, social and environmental policies in order to achieve sustainable development, and resulted in a non-binding agreement on a set of principles known as "The Future We Want" (UN, 2012).

The SDGs, encompassed in the SDG Agenda *Transforming our world: the 2030 agenda for sustainable development*, built on the principles agreed upon at the Rio+20

Summit and renewed international commitment to the vision of the MDGs (UN, 2015). Endorsed by 193 countries at a United Nations' Summit held in New York from September 25-27, 2015, the agenda officially came in to force on January 1, 2016. The SDGs are comprised of a set of 17 goals, 169 targets and 244 indicators (including nine repeated indicators) (United Nations Economic and Social Council [UNSD], 2016a). The SDGs also urgently call for proper data collection and disaggregation to measure the achievement of these goals, making it easier to address any identified inequities and measure progress towards attaining the goals.

Many of the SDGs are interrelated, with the achievement of one goal and/or target facilitating the achievement of another goal. For example, efforts made to end poverty and hunger (Goals 1 and 2), will improve healthy lives (Goal 3), cannot be achieved without improving education, gender equality and economic growth (Goals 4, 5 and 8). Likewise, steps taken to achieve some targets can be detrimental to other goals, so thoughtful work needs to occur nationally while implementing the goals to avoid widening inequities within and among countries. For example, any progress towards building economic infrastructure in a country (Goals 8 and 9) could come at the detriment of the climate, ocean bodies and biodiversity (Goals 13, 14 and 15). These connections and contradictions affect the ongoing realities Indigenous peoples face on their lands. Table 1 left lists the 17 SDGs.



TABLE 1

| Number  | Goal  |
|---------|---|
| Goal 1  | End poverty in all its forms everywhere.  |
| Goal 2  | End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture.   |
| Goal 3  | Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages.  |
| Goal 4  | Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all.   |
| Goal 5  | Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls.  |
| Goal 6  | Ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all.   |
| Goal 7  | Ensure access to affordable, reliable, sustainable, and modern energy for all.  |
| Goal 8  | Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive Employment and decent work for all.   |
| Goal 9  | Build resilient infrastructure, promote inclusive and sustainable industrialization and foster innovation.  |
| Goal 10 | Reduce inequality in and among countries.   |
| Goal 11 | Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable.   |
| Goal 12 | Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns.   |
| Goal 13 | Urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts.   |
| Goal 14 | Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development.   |
| Goal 15 | Protect, restore and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, and halt and reverse land degradation and halt biodiversity loss. |
| Goal 16 | Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels.            |
| Goal 17 | Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the global partnership for sustainable development.   |





*The SDGs are especially important to Indigenous peoples, who come from all continents in the world and have a shared story of marginalization and poor health compared to their non-Indigenous counterparts.*



# 3.0 THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS AND INDIGENOUS PEOPLES

The SDGs are especially important to Indigenous peoples, who come from all continents in the world and have a shared story of marginalization and poor health compared to their non-Indigenous counterparts. With their focus on improving the health of all individuals of participating states and eliminating socio-economic disparities, the SDGs represent a vision for everyone to achieve a high standard of health irrespective of sex, age, gender, race, ethnicity and country. They also represent an opportunity to eliminate poverty and improve the health and well-being of Indigenous peoples through action on the social determinants of health, while proactively curbing some of the negative impacts of globalization on the planet for future generations. The SDGs thus partially embody Indigenous peoples' holistic view of health, which encompasses the interrelatedness of all spheres of life – spiritual, physical, social and environmental.

All 17 of the SDGs are relevant to the health of the Indigenous peoples, though some are arguably more relevant than others. However, there are currently no standalone goals for Indigenous peoples at the international level, though Indigenous peoples are referenced six times in the resolution (United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues [UNPFII], 2016). Specifically, Indigenous peoples are mentioned in Goals 2 and 4. In Goal 2, Indigenous peoples are mentioned alongside women, farmers, pastoralists and fishers in relation to doubling agricultural productivity and the incomes of low-scale food producers. In Goal 4, Indigenous peoples are referenced with regard to equitable education and elimination of gender disparities. In describing the new agenda in the final resolution, Indigenous peoples are also mentioned as a vulnerable population that must be empowered

(UN, 2015). All states agree that Indigenous peoples should have inclusive and quality education. The SDGs agenda identifies the need for Indigenous peoples to work together with the government and various stakeholders to achieve the 2030 agenda. Finally, the agenda encourages states to include Indigenous peoples at national and sub-national levels in the progress evaluation of all SDG goals and targets.





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## 4.0 INDIGENOUS PEOPLES IN CANADA



Indigenous peoples are a culturally diverse population living in regions all across Canada. There are three constitutionally recognized Indigenous peoples: First Nations, Inuit and Métis. According to the 2016 Census, there are approximately 1.67 million identified Indigenous peoples, representing 4.9% of the Canadian population (Statistics Canada, 2017a). The Indigenous population has seen a 42.5% increase since the 2006 Census, with the Métis experiencing the largest growth over this period (Statistics Canada, 2017b). Among the Indigenous population, 58.4% identified as First Nations, 35.1% identified as Métis, and 3.9% identified as Inuit (Statistics Canada, 2017a).

Approximately 44% of First Nations with registered or treaty Indian status lived on a reserve. While the largest number of First Nations people reside in Ontario, British Columbia and Alberta, they comprise a relatively small proportion of the population in these provinces and are more heavily concentrated in the Northwest Territories, Manitoba and Saskatchewan (Statistics Canada, 2017a). Most of the Métis live in Ontario (20.5%), Alberta (19.5%), Manitoba (15.2%), and British Columbia (15.2%), primarily in urban centres, while almost three quarters of Inuit reside in Inuit Nunangat, which encompasses the four regions of Nunavut, Nunatsiavut (northern Labrador), Nunavik (northern Quebec), and Inuvialuit (Northwest Territories).

Indigenous peoples in Canada are a relatively young population, representing a rich resource for economic development as many Indigenous people can contribute to the workforce in their respective provinces or territories. The average age for Indigenous peoples is 32.1 compared to 40.9 for non-Indigenous people (Statistics Canada, 2017a). This is due primarily to a high fertility rate and lower life expectancy compared to non-Indigenous Canadians (Morency, Caron-Malenfant, Coulombe, & Langlois, 2015). While the proportions of the population that are young (14 years and under) and old (65 years and older) are nearly equal in the non-Indigenous population, at just over 15%, children comprise a considerably larger proportion of the Indigenous population, outnumbering seniors by more than 4.5, 7.0, and 2.6 times in First Nations, Inuit, and Métis populations respectively (Statistics Canada, 2017a). This population pyramid (including higher rates of young populations compared to older populations) is typical of countries with emerging economies, and/or developing and underdeveloped countries (Nargund, 2009).



*...distal determinants are factors considered to exert the most profound influence on the health of a population even though they are not always visible. These include colonialism, racism and social exclusion, and self-determination (Reading, & Wien, 2013).*

#### 4.1 The determinants of health of Indigenous peoples in Canada

Indigenous people in Canada experience a disproportionate burden of ill health due to a number of factors that influence health and well-being. These factors, often described as the “social determinants of health”, are the “conditions in which people are born, grow, work, live, and age, and the wider set of forces and systems shaping the conditions of daily life” (World Health Organization, 2017, para. 1). The determinants of Indigenous peoples’ health are complex, interrelated, and intersect across a life course. As such, the *Integrated Life Course* and *social determinants* models of Indigenous health provide a good framework for understanding the health inequities Indigenous peoples experience (Reading & Wien,

2013). The Life Course component articulates that events occurring in early stages of a child’s development can have health implications later in adulthood. These events are cumulative and act as determinants of the health of that individual. The social determinants of health component focuses on the factors that influence health and well-being. They are categorized as proximal, intermediate and distal. Proximal determinants are conditions that directly influence the four dimensions of Indigenous well-being (physical, mental, emotional and spiritual), such as health behaviors like smoking, alcohol abuse, lack of exercise and diet; elements of the physical environment such as housing, water supply, geographic location; as well as socio-economic factors like employment, income, education and food security (Reading & Wien, 2013). However, while these factors are considered to

be the causes of ill health, strategies aimed at addressing them in isolation will be inadequate as they will not address the root causes of these issues.

Intermediate determinants represent the origins of proximal determinants. They include structural systems such as the health care or education systems, the availability of community infrastructure and resources, environmental stewardship, and cultural continuity (Reading & Wien, 2013). Underfunding of health and educational systems, a lack of culturally appropriate services, rapid staff turnover, and lack of control over the decisions that affect their health are impediments to the overall well-being of Indigenous peoples (Reading & Wien, 2013).

Finally, distal determinants are factors considered to exert the



most profound influence on the health of a population even though they are not always visible. These include colonialism, racism and social exclusion, and self-determination (Reading, & Wien, 2013). Colonialism is considered to be the root of all causes of ill health for Indigenous peoples, resulting in a loss of land, culture, language, family values and spirituality, which contributes to despondency, loss of self-esteem, and loss of pride in cultural identity. Colonialism is not simply an historic event, but continues to manifest in the present day through various political and social policies and institutional racism. Some of the major colonial policies which have had significant, and intergenerational, impacts to the health and well-being of Indigenous peoples in Canada include the 1867 *Indian Act*,<sup>3</sup> the Residential School system,<sup>4</sup> the 1960's Scoop,<sup>5</sup> and the current child welfare system, in which Indigenous children are drastically overrepresented (Aboriginal Healing Foundation [AHF], 2005; Lee & Ferrer, 2014). In an attempt to assimilate Indigenous peoples, these historical and continued processes have contributed to many of the negative consequences associated with the enduring health disparities and poor well-being of many Indigenous peoples and communities. Bombay, Matheson and Anisman (2014) explain how collective stressors and

traumatic historical experiences are passed on to subsequent generations, often through child abuse (emotional, physical or sexual). Some Survivors of the Residential School System passed to their children the abusive forms of discipline they experienced in these schools. These historical stressors interact with contemporary negative stressors such as poverty, food insecurity, poor housing, and racism, perpetuating ill health in the community, the family and for children. Greenwood, de Leeuw, Lindsay, and Reading (2015) argue that factors beyond the social – including spirituality, relationship to the land, geography, colonialism, history, culture, language and knowledge systems – are especially important to Indigenous peoples' health and well-being. It is therefore necessary that strategies to address health inequities experienced by Indigenous peoples consider factors beyond the social, as well as events that occur over the life course of the population.

While Indigenous peoples have experienced some improvements in the determinants that affect their health in recent decades, they have also experienced some setbacks. There has been a significant reduction in the level of poverty and great strides have been made in education. Some Indigenous communities have won legal battles over their right to lands, while others

have signed treaties. The federal government commissioned a “Truth and Reconciliation Commission” (TRC) to investigate the decades of abuse experienced by Indigenous children who attended residential schools across Canada. Over the five years of its mandate (2010-2015), the Commission documented the truth of survivors, families and communities, culminating in the production of a final report with 94 Calls to Action to redress the legacy of these schools and advance the process of reconciliation (TRC, 2015). In 2016, the Liberal Government declared its full support of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous peoples (UNDRIP), which its Conservative predecessor had failed to endorse in 2007 (Fontaine, 2016). Nevertheless, despite a historic Canadian Human Rights Tribunal decision which

*Colonialism is not simply an historic event, but continues to manifest in the present day through various political and social policies and institutional racism.*



<sup>3</sup> The *Indian Act* of 1867, imposed on Indigenous peoples by the Canadian government, established new systems of governance and control over Indigenous peoples based on principles of paternalism and assimilation, removed Indigenous peoples from their traditional lands onto small parcels of land called reserves, and redefined Aboriginal identity.

<sup>4</sup> The Indian Residential Schools were state and church run schools where children that were forcefully taken from their homes, families and communities were educated with the intention of assimilating them into Euro-Western culture (Aguiar & Halseth, 2015).

<sup>5</sup> The 60's Scoop is the period from 1960 – 1969 where new child protection legislation was created allowing for the mass apprehension of Indigenous children from their communities for adoption by white families or into foster care (AHF, 2005).

found the Canadian government was discriminating against First Nations children by underfunding child welfare services on reserve and failing to implement Jordan's Principle,<sup>6</sup> Indigenous peoples continue to experience racism and discrimination, as well as inequitable funding and resources for social and health services. They continue to remain a socio-economically disadvantaged group with health disparities across a range of physical and mental health issues, including diabetes, obesity, cardiovascular illness, depression, suicide, and substance abuse, among others.

## 4.2 The SDGs and Indigenous Peoples in Canada

The SDGs, with their expansive reach and comprehensive targets across multiple domains of sustainability, have the potential to more holistically address the health issues faced by Indigenous peoples than previous approaches. This section will explore the potential impact of the SDGs and their relevance for Indigenous peoples in Canada, with emphasis on the goals that influence socio-economic marginalization. While a number of the goals do not perfectly fit under one specific theme due to the integrated nature of the SDGs, this discussion will nevertheless endeavor

to group the goals into four themes: socio-economic marginalization, promotion of health and well-being, equality and social inclusiveness, and the environment.

### Theme 1: Socio-economic Marginalization

Socio-economic marginalization is the relegation of certain groups of people to the outer fringes of mainstream society, both socially and economically. This process inhibits groups from gaining equal access to resources and ignores their needs and desires, relegating them to positions of disadvantage, thus preventing them from developing to their full potential and becoming productive members of society (Schiffer & Schatz, 2008). The development goals that address this theme are Goals 1, 2, 4, 8, 9 and aspects of 10. Some of these goals are discussed below.

#### **End poverty in all its forms everywhere (Goal 1)**

In the MDGs, poverty was framed as a problem for low-income countries. The SDGs agenda makes it increasingly clear that poverty also exists and is unacceptably high in high-income countries. Poverty can be defined in either absolute (the accessibility of

resources necessary for survival) or relative (in relation to some average standard of living within a specific region or community) terms (Collin & Campbell, 2008; Lamman & Macintyre, 2016). In Canada, the various measures that have been used to monitor poverty have included the Low Income Measure (LIM) (50% of the median family income adjusted for different household types and derived from both before- and after-tax income) and/or the Low Income Cut-off (LICO) (family spending on food, clothing and shelter which is 20% more than the amount spent by the average family) (Collin & Campbell, 2008). Several other tools have been used to measure poverty in Canada, including the Basic Needs Measure (cost of basic necessities), Market Basket Measure (the cost of a basket of goods for a family of two adults and two children), and the Human Poverty Index (which estimates poverty as a measure of longevity, education and a decent standard of living rather than on income alone) (Collin & Campbell, 2008). All these have unique advantages and disadvantages, creating a challenge in monitoring poverty. The most commonly reported on by the federal government of Canada are LIM, LICO, and MBM (Lamman & Macintyre, 2016).

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<sup>6</sup> Jordan's Principle emerged from a jurisdictional dispute involving a young First Nations boy, Jordan River Anderson, who was born with a rare disorder that required hospitalization from birth (FNCFCS, 2016). After two years of hospitalization, doctors felt he could receive care in a medically trained family home near hospital; however, a jurisdictional dispute between the federal and provincial governments over who should pay for his at-home care resulted in his dying in hospital without ever having spent a day in his family home. As a result of his death, the House of Commons passed a motion in 2007 that affirms Jordan's Principle, a child-first principle meant to prevent First Nations children from being denied access to or experiencing delays in essential services as a result of jurisdictional disputes regarding payment. The principle affirms that the government department of first contact will pay for the services first, and once the service has been provided, the department of first contact can seek reimbursement from another department/government (INAC, 2017).



*If only Indigenous children were considered, Canada's child poverty rate would be among the highest of all member countries of the Organization of Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD).*



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While Canada does not meet the United Nations' definition of 'extreme states of poverty,' that is living on less than \$1.25 a day (UNSD, 2016b), poverty rates nevertheless remain high among Indigenous populations (especially those living in northern and remote regions), as well as among other vulnerable populations like single-female led families and people with disabilities. Using the LIM, which is based on current income distributions, an estimated 25.3% of Indigenous people were categorized as low-income in 2011 compared to 14.9% of Canadians on average (Kindornay, Sharpe, Sengupta, Sirag, & Capeluck, 2015). Poverty rates also show regional and demographic inequalities. For example, while the national child poverty rate was 18% in 2010, 60% of status and on-reserve First Nation, 30% of non-status First Nations, 25% of Inuit, and 23% of Métis children were living below the poverty line compared to only 13% of non-Indigenous, non-immigrant children (Macdonald & Wilson, 2016). If only Indigenous children

were considered, Canada's child poverty rate would be among the highest of all member countries of the Organization of Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD). Furthermore, Manitoba and Saskatchewan have the highest on-reserve child poverty rates in Canada, 76% and 69% respectively, compared to Quebec which has the lowest at 37% (Macdonald & Wilson, 2016).

Poverty must also be considered from a culturally appropriate perspective. Since poverty manifests in different realms, including income insecurity, housing and homelessness, poor health, food insecurity, poor or inadequate early childhood education, and unemployment, among others (Dignity for All, 2015), a unidimensional measure of poverty, based solely on income/cost of living, may not fully capture how poverty is experienced by individuals. A multidimensional measure may be required. Internationally, the Human Development Index (HDI) has been

used to assess and compare progress on three dimensions of poverty – educational attainment, income and life expectancy. Canada has ranked well on this index globally, 10th out of 188 countries and territories in 2016 (United Nations Development Programme [UNDP], 2016a). However, some groups, including Indigenous populations, experience disadvantages because of discrimination, depriving them of equal access to opportunities related to education, employment, land and property (UNDP, 2016b).

The HDI has been used to measure well-being for Registered Indians in Canada. Over the period 1981-2001, the well-being of Registered Indians had increased, however their HDI score was consistently lower than that of other Canadians (Cooke & Beavon, 2007). However, anecdotal evidence suggested that considerable variability existed in the well-being of Indigenous communities and that the HDI was not providing a complete picture of well-being in this population (Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada



[AANDC]<sup>7</sup>, 2015a/b). In response, the federal government developed the Community Well-being Index (CWB) to examine socio-economic well-being at the community level, which necessitated a modification of the original HDI to account for unreliable or unavailable population data for small size communities. The CWB includes education, employment, housing and labour force activity dimensions. Over the period 1981-2011, the CWB score increased for First Nations, Inuit and non-Indigenous communities; however, the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities widened over the 2001-2006 Censuses and continues to be substantial (AANDC, 2015a/b). Further, over the years a greater proportion of First Nations and Inuit communities began experiencing declines in

their CWB scores compared to non-Indigenous communities. For First Nations communities, the decline began during the 1991-1996 period, decreasing from 82% of communities remaining stable or experiencing an increase in their CWB scores to only 64% during the 2006-2011 period (AANDC, 2015a). While this decline started five years earlier for Inuit communities compared to First Nations, with the exception of one census period, a greater proportion of Inuit communities have seen increasing or stable CWB scores compared to their First Nations counterparts<sup>8</sup> (AANDC, 2015b).

In 2010, a Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI) was introduced in the global Human Development Report. This index measures the intensity of poverty through three dimensions:

- 1) education is measured using two indicators (years of schooling, children enrolled);
- 2) health is measured using two indicators (nutrition, child mortality); and
- 3) living standards are measured using six indicators (cooking fuel, toilet, water, electricity, floor, assets) (UNDP, 2016a).

These indicators are used to calculate a household deprivation score; if the score is 33.3% or higher, the household is classified as multi-dimensionally poor, while scores greater than or equal to 50% are classified as living in severe multi-dimensional poverty. While the MPI has been used to calculate poverty for 102 developing countries in the 2015 Human Development Report, a lack of relevant data has prevented its use in Canada (UNDP, 2016a).

<sup>7</sup> The AANDC department was renamed Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada in 2015.

<sup>8</sup> The exception to this was the 1996-2001 census periods, in which the 71% of First Nations communities saw increases or remained stable in their CWB scores compared to 70% of Inuit communities.

SDG 1 represents a unique opportunity for Canada to address poverty within its own borders. Targets set under this goal describe how Canada can end poverty by adopting national social protection systems (Target 1.3), ensuring equal rights to economic resources and control over land (Target 1.4), and building the resilience of vulnerable populations and protecting them from adverse climatic conditions (Target 1.5). However, poverty alleviation for Indigenous peoples in Canada faces several challenges.

Target 1.4 represents an opportunity to tackle land ownership as a source of socio-economic empowerment for Indigenous peoples. However, the 2030 Agenda fails to specifically address Indigenous ownership of land in their respective states. Instead, the target mentions only the “proportion of adult men and women with secure tenure rights to land.” This failure has been a huge disappointment to many Indigenous peoples globally and in Canada. Indicators under this target should have included an Indigenous specifier so that all countries can report on this. While the wealth-generating capacity of land and its ability to provide food security are identified in the document, 9 of 10 provinces in Canada prohibit the sale of hunted meat, impacting the ability of Indigenous peoples to earn an income from their limited landownership (British Columbia Council for International Cooperation [BCCIC], 2017). Notwithstanding, Indigenous peoples’ legal rights to their lands are enshrined in the Canadian Constitution and in numerous Supreme Court resolutions to ensure this target is achieved. Though

securing Indigenous tenure over land will be a challenging task given the political climate, this target is vital to addressing the socio-economic marginalization of Indigenous peoples in Canada, and to sustaining their culture and way of life.

Another challenge to tackling poverty in Canada is how to measure SDG 1 in the absence of a national definition of poverty. The lack of a national measure creates a tenuous policy environment for monitoring poverty nationally and among vulnerable groups (Harris, 2016). A comprehensive measure should be adopted so that a transparent, measureable and comparable national antipoverty framework can be developed. In the absence of such a framework, provincial and territorial governments will be considered as having the primary responsibility for poverty alleviation, in spite of the many avenues by which the federal government can, and does, contribute in this area. For Indigenous peoples, poverty alleviation requires collaboration between the federal, provincial, and Indigenous governments, scholars, and representatives from civil society. On October 17, 2016, the federal government announced a decision to develop a national poverty reduction strategy (Khanna, 2016). Many poverty alleviation strategies have been proposed; these will be discussed in the recommendation section. It is important to note that given the multi-dimensional nature of poverty, strategies must be inclusive of issues on food (in)security (Goal 2), housing and homelessness, education (Goal 4), employment (Goal 8), and ill health (Goal 3).

Poverty alleviation for Indigenous populations in Canada is also complicated by jurisdictional issues. The federal government has jurisdiction for the provision of services (health, education, social, legal, etc.) for status and on-reserve First Nations and Inuit living on their traditional lands, while provincial and territorial jurisdictions govern the provision of services for off-reserve Indigenous people. This has created an inequitable service provision environment, where some Indigenous people are able to access specific services while others are not, as well as ambiguity and conflict over which level of government should pay for services. While the Supreme Court of Canada’s recent Daniels decision recognized the rights of Métis and non-status Indians and the federal government’s constitutional responsibility for these two groups, the ruling will have no immediate impact on their eligibility for programs and services currently targeted at Status Indians (INAC, 2016). However, it does set the starting point for negotiating rights, treaties, services and benefits with the federal government.

### **End hunger, achieve food security, improve nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture (Goal 2)**

The second goal calls for an end to hunger and many variants of food insecurity. Food insecurity is the uncertainty and anxiety about household food supplies which can result in altered eating patterns and compromises to the quality and quantity of food consumed (Chen & Che, 2001; Tarasuk, Mitchell, & Dachner, 2016). In extreme cases, people miss meals and go days without food. There are four



dimensions of food security/ insecurity: food secure, marginal, moderate and severe food insecurity (Tarasuk et al., 2016). The Dieticians of Canada (2016) emphasize that marginal forms of food insecurity are sensitive markers of income loss or deprivation and a prelude to more severe forms of food insecurity.

Indigenous peoples are considered to be among the most food insecure populations in Canada (Chen & Che, 2001; Tarasuk, et al., 2016). In 2014, 12% of non-Indigenous households were considered to be food insecure, compared to 25.7% of Indigenous households (Tarasuk et al., 2016). Of the Indigenous households, 6% were marginally food insecure, 11.8% were moderately food insecure, and 7.9% were severely food insecure. The geographic location of Indigenous peoples contributes to food insecurity, with the highest rates found in the North and in the Maritimes. The predominantly Inuit territory of Nunavut has the highest rate of food insecurity in Canada, with 60% of the territory's

children living in food insecure households (Tarasuk et al., 2016). Food insecurity is not just a problem within remote communities and for Indigenous people living on reserves, but also affects Indigenous people off reserve. From 2007-2010, 22% of off-reserve First Nations, 27% of Inuit, and 15% of Métis people 12 years and older were moderately or severely food insecure compared to only 7% of non-Indigenous people (Statistics Canada, 2015). This level of food insecurity has contributed to a myriad of chronic physical and mental illnesses (Tarasuk et al., 2016; Chen & Che, 2001; Dieticians of Canada, 2016). Colonization and widespread poverty, coupled with a departure from traditional ways of procuring food, loss of cultural knowledge, and family disintegration, are at the root of food insecurity and malnutrition among Indigenous peoples.

Since food insecurity and poverty tend to co-occur, poverty alleviation strategies have the potential to reduce rates of food insecurity in

Canada. However, they must be adapted to the unique cultural, geographic, and economic context of Indigenous communities, as well as the level of provincial or territorial government involvement in poverty alleviation if they are to be effective. Presently, Canada is well positioned to tackle food insecurity nationally and internationally because of its economic wealth, abundance of natural resources, industrial agricultural production, and expertise. However, the industrial scale of agricultural production is currently conducted with limited regard to biodiversity. Other forms of food production such as hunting, fishing, and gathering should be encouraged, especially in Indigenous territories (Klassen, 2016), and Indigenous communities should have the ability to benefit economically from these food production techniques. Policies that improve such food production practices necessitate the recognition of land rights (Target 1.4) (Klassen, 2016).

*Colonization and widespread poverty, coupled with a departure from traditional ways of procuring food, loss of cultural knowledge, and family disintegration, are at the root of food insecurity and malnutrition among Indigenous peoples.*



## Housing and Homelessness

The issues of poor quality or inadequate housing and homelessness are not encompassed within any of the standalone goals, likely because they are considered a consequence or manifestation of poverty. However, Target 11.1 specifically mentions that there should be access to adequate, safe and affordable housing for all people by 2030 (UNSD, 2016b). The health and well-being of individuals can be affected by the physical, social, and/or environmental dimensions of housing, including the condition of the housing, its availability and affordability, the number of people living in the household, the nature of housing tenure, the proximity of housing to essential services, and household exposure to ecological contaminants, among others (National Collaborating Centre for Aboriginal Health [NCCA], 2017b).

While Indigenous people in Canada live in households that vary in condition, composition and location, it is well recognized that housing is a serious issue in Indigenous communities. The vast majority of Indigenous homes are unsuitable, substandard and overcrowded (Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation [CMHC], 2011, 2013, 2015, 2016). More than a third of Inuit houses in northern regions and 43% of First Nations on-reserve homes require major repairs, compared to only 7% of non-Indigenous homes (Statistics Canada, 2015). Existing housing infrastructure has failed to keep pace with the growing Indigenous population, with 33% of Inuit identified as being in core housing

need compared to 12.5% of non-Indigenous households (CMHC, 2015), and an estimated 35,000-85,000 new homes needed to meet the current housing shortfall and demand in First Nations reserve communities (AANDC, 2010). Furthermore, many of the houses in Inuit Nunangat are social housing units (80%), with very few privately owned homes (7%) (Knotsch & Kinnon, 2011). Poor housing quality and availability leads to overcrowding.

Indigenous people are also more likely to live in overcrowded housing, defined by Statistics Canada (2008) as more than one person per room (Statistics Canada, 2008). The highest cases of overcrowding are among First Nations living on reserve (27.2%) and Inuit (38.7%), while Métis are less likely to live in overcrowded conditions than the non-Indigenous population (3.1% compared to 4.0% respectively) (Statistics Canada, 2015).

Overcrowding is associated with a myriad of poor health conditions such as the transmission of acute and chronic infectious illnesses like influenza and tuberculosis (NCCA, 2017b). It is also associated with poorer educational attainment, sleep deprivation, and an increased risk of child apprehension by the child welfare system (NCCA, 2017b).

Indigenous people disproportionately experience homelessness and constitute a significant proportion of homeless populations in cities. (Canadian Observatory on Homelessness [COH], 2017). However, Indigenous people may define homelessness differently from non-Indigenous populations. While the non-

Indigenous Caucasian population defines homelessness as a lack of stable housing, Indigenous populations define it as the absence of social, cultural, and family supports (Klodawsky, 2006). Urban Indigenous people are eight times more likely to experience homelessness than non-Indigenous people (COH, 2017). This means that 1 in 15 urban Indigenous people experience homelessness compared to 1 in 128 non-indigenous people (COH, 2017). In several studies of homelessness in major urban centres across Canada, Indigenous people have constituted anywhere from 11 to 96% of the total homeless population within selected cities (Belanger, Awosoga, & Weasel Head, 2013; Belanger, Weasel Head, & Awosoga, 2012; Patrick, 2014). There are multiple pathways to becoming homeless, reflecting the complex interaction of individual and societal issues at play, including transition from reserves to urban areas, racism, discrimination, low levels of education, unemployment, mental illness, substance abuse, family dysfunction, community violence and unemployment (COH, 2017). Notwithstanding, most issues related to homelessness among Indigenous people are structural and have their roots in colonialism, historical and intergenerational transfer of trauma. Solutions to poor housing and homelessness will therefore be different for Indigenous people than for non-Indigenous populations and among the different Indigenous groups (Patrick, 2014). These solutions need to recognize the need for cultural and social supports among homeless Indigenous people in addition to the presence of a physical housing structure. The solutions also need to recognize the

link between homelessness and the contributory factors discussed above. While poverty reduction strategies could include initiatives that address housing for the homeless, given the magnitude of the problem of homelessness in Canada (and especially among Indigenous peoples), it may be more effective to address the issue of homelessness separately from anti-poverty measures.

**Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education... and promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all (Goals 4 and 8)**

Education is the gateway to the acquisition of skills and knowledge and is instrumental for alleviating poverty. Goal 4 recognizes the need for early childhood development (Target 4.2) and curricula that teach about human rights, gender equality, and the promotion of a culture of peace and non-violence (Target 4.7). However, this goal overlooks the many barriers that affect learning for Indigenous peoples that are rooted in historic and contemporary impacts of colonialism on educational attainment. Further, it emphasizes the Eurocentric knowledge (reading and mathematics) that is reflected within mainstream education systems, while failing to reflect Indigenous methods of learning and Indigenous knowledges. There is recognition among Indigenous scholars that Indigenous education must be completely transformed

and decolonized so that the effects of colonization “can be healed and transcended” (Cajete, 2000, p. 181; see also Battiste, 2002, 2004, 2013; Wildcat, McDonald, Irlbacher-Fox, & Coulthard, 2014). In order for education to be inclusive of Indigenous peoples, Indigenous learning and assessment methods and culturally relevant curriculum must be equally valued. Decolonized education is seen as being critical for restoring a strong sense of identity and pride in Indigenous peoples, which is central to academic success (Schissel & Wotherspoon, 2003). The Canadian Council on Learning (CCL) put it succinctly: “if decades of Aboriginal poverty and marginalization are to be reversed, there is an urgent need to re-examine what is understood as First Nations, Inuit and Métis learning and how it is measured and monitored” (2007, p. 3).

Education is associated with employment, as higher levels of education generally correspond with higher employment rates, more full-time work, and greater employment stability (OECD, 2011a/b). In 2011, 75.8% of non-Indigenous people aged 25 to 64 years were employed compared with 62.5% of Indigenous people – 57.1% of First Nations, 58.6% of Inuit, 71.2% of Métis (Statistics Canada, 2015). However, a smaller gap existed between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people (61.3% vs. 66.2%) with respect to labour force participation,<sup>9</sup> a key contributor to

economic development (61.3% vs. 66.2%), signifying a willingness of Indigenous peoples to contribute to the economy (National Aboriginal Economic Development Board [NAEDB], 2015). Data from the 2011 National Household Survey (NHS) and the 2012 Aboriginal Peoples Survey (APS) highlights the association between education and employment for Indigenous peoples. Employment rates are considerably higher for Indigenous people with higher levels of education compared to those with lower levels (though the difference is not as great for Métis as it is for First Nations and Inuit) (Kelly-Scott & Smith, 2015).

Education is also associated with income. The higher the level of formal education, the narrower the income inequity gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples. The overall median income in 2010 for all levels of education was \$27,866 for Indigenous people compared to \$38,657 for the non-Indigenous people, with incomes lowest for First Nations (\$23,571), followed by Inuit (\$29,047), and Métis (\$34,915) (Statistics Canada, 2015). With a postsecondary certificate, diploma or degree, the earned median income was \$33,134 for First Nations, \$41,379 for Métis, and \$42,237 for Inuit, compared to \$44,000 for non-Indigenous people (Statistics Canada, 2015). While the median income gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people appears to have decreased somewhat between the

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<sup>9</sup> The labor force participation rate is the share of the population aged 15 years and older that is either employed or unemployed and looking for work.



2006 and 2011 census years, in 2011 unemployment rates were much higher for Indigenous compared to non-Indigenous people (15% compared to 7.5%), and a significant proportion of Indigenous people (36.5%) relied on government transfers as a primary source of income (NAEDB, 2015). Since Indigenous people participate less in the labor market compared to non-Indigenous people, policy makers (Indigenous and non-Indigenous) should be interested in strategies that improve the socio-economic infrastructure within Indigenous communities, that create jobs and reduce the socio-economic gap, and that improve health and well-being generally.

Education is a key to economic empowerment. In order to improve educational attainment for Indigenous peoples, attention must be paid to a number of SDG targets related to Goal 4. Target 4.1 stipulates that by 2030, all boys and girls should receive free, equitable and quality primary and secondary education. Canada currently leads the world in terms of educational attainment; however, its education system appears to be failing Indigenous students (Parkin, 2015). Indigenous peoples generally have lower levels of education compared to the general Canadian population. In 2011, 29% of Indigenous people aged 25 to 64 years had no ‘certificate, diploma or degree’ compared to 12% of non-Indigenous people, and 48% of Indigenous peoples (55% of Métis, 45% of First Nations and 36% of Inuit) had a

post-secondary education compared to 65% of non-Indigenous people (Statistics Canada, 2015). While rates of education have been increasing for Indigenous peoples, they have also been increasing for non-Indigenous people and the education gap between these two groups has, in fact, been increasing, from 12% in 1996 to 17% in 2011 (Parkin, 2015).

Indigenous children face numerous barriers to equitable education, operating from the individual to broader societal and environmental levels. They include:

- racism, discrimination, and the maintenance of stereotypes within the learning environment;
- inequitable control over the education system by the dominant culture;
- language and literacy barriers;
- curriculum and pedagogy that is culturally unrelated to Indigenous students’ needs;
- socio-economic marginalization including poverty, unemployment, poor quality or overcrowded housing, and malnutrition;
- geography;
- the impacts of a legacy of intergenerational trauma, including poor self-esteem, self-concept and self-worth, on academic achievement; and
- inequitable funding for education (NCCAH, 2017a).

Many of these barriers stem from the historic and contemporary impacts of colonialism. In rural and remote

Indigenous communities, limited school and educational opportunities may force many students to leave the support of their families and communities for further education, something that may be particularly traumatizing for younger students. For example, a survey conducted in 2011 found that 31% of on-reserve First Nations students must attend off-reserve provincial schools due to a lack of schools on reserve; most of these were students attending secondary schools (Chiefs Assembly on Education [CAE], 2012). Multi-faceted and multi-sectoral strategies, are needed to address these numerous barriers. This includes strategies within the education sector, as well as strategies focused on addressing the many socio-economic disparities Indigenous people face, including poverty, housing, economic development, among others.

Federally supported Indigenous educational systems have been chronically underfunded for many years. While per student funding varies widely across Canada and across First Nations schools due to differences in funding agreements between the federal government and First Nations bands as well as provincial jurisdiction over education for the general student population, federal instructional funding for on-reserve First Nations is less than provincial instructional funding in almost every one of Canada’s largest provinces<sup>10</sup> (20-50% less in some parts of the country) (Drummond & Kachuck Rosenbluth, 2013).

<sup>10</sup> Provinces assessed included, Quebec, Ontario, Manitoba, Saskatchewan, Alberta and BC. In 2009, only in Manitoba did federal instructional funding for First Nations school divisions exceed that of provincial instructional funding for the general provincial population.



*Indigenous knowledges, perspectives and pedagogies must be fully integrated into educational curricula, with Indigenous knowledge validated as a full and equal partner rather than being treated as an 'add on' or 'other' way of knowing*

(Battiste, 2002; Munroe, Borden, Orr, Toney, & Meader, 2013; CCL, 2007).

This funding disparity is one of the most critical factors preventing the delivery of high quality education services for First Nations living on reserve. These inequities highlight the need for additional Indigenous-specific indicators to measure progress on Target 4.1 in relation to the availability of schools and the adequacy of school resources to ensure equity in accessing quality education.

There is also a need to pay specific attention to Target 4.4, which emphasizes the importance of upgrading school infrastructure, which is a major source of concern on First Nations reserves and in Inuit Nunangat. For example, a 2011 survey of on-reserve First Nations education indicated that the majority of First Nations schools on reserve were in a poor state of repair, 32% lacked access to clean drinking water, and a significant proportion

lacked access to additional amenities considered essential for supporting student learning in the modern era, including fully equipped playing or indoor fields, kitchens, science labs, libraries, and access to technology (CAE, 2012).

As improving educational attainment must begin in early childhood to enhance children's future physical, cognitive, emotional and social development and maximize their future well-being, Target 4.2, ensuring all boys and girls have access to quality early childhood development, is especially important for First Nations, Inuit and Métis children. Programs like Aboriginal Head Start (AHS) provide community-based, culturally focused, education centred on fostering the spiritual, emotional, intellectual and physical growth of young Indigenous children (both on and off reserve), while supporting parents and guardians as their primary teachers. Indigenous-specific early childhood education programs such as AHS have resulted in positive outcomes for children in terms of school readiness, improved academic performance, and health behaviours (Ball and Moselle, 2012; Government of Canada, 2012; Mashford-Pringle, 2012), as well as for parents/caregivers and community members in terms of health status, health promoting behaviours, improved parenting skills and knowledge, and a commitment to culture and linguistic revitalization (Mashford-Pringle, 2012). However, access to AHS programs is inequitable across Canada, with gaps in services for children living in the smallest communities that lack the resources and capacity to initiate or maintain



early childhood education programs. At present, there are 88 AHS projects focused predominantly on First Nations children (serving approximately 55% of off-reserve First Nations), 57 projects focused predominantly on Métis children (serving approximately 19% of Métis), and 31 projects focused predominantly on Inuit children (serving approximately 21% of Inuit) (Public Health Agency of Canada [PHAC], 2017). On-reserve First Nations communities also lack access to early childhood education programs like the AHS, with a 2011 survey revealing that 67% of First Nations communities had such programs, but only 22% accessed them due to long wait lists (CAE, 2012). The presence of Indigenous-specific indicators on the availability of quality early childhood education programs and the proportion of Indigenous students participating in such programs is needed to effectively address Target 4.2.

Finally, Target 4.7 focuses on ensuring learners acquire the knowledge and skills they need to promote sustainable development, including, among others, appreciation of cultural diversity and of culture's contribution to sustainable development. Indigenous peoples, who have a deep connection to the land and have used its resources sustainably for centuries, have much knowledge to offer on sustainable development. However, at present, mainstream education systems in Canada do not fully appreciate cultural diversity or the contributions of Indigenous cultures to sustainable development. Indigenous knowledges, perspectives and pedagogies must be fully integrated into educational curricula,

with Indigenous knowledge validated as a full and equal partner rather than being treated as an 'add on' or 'other' way of knowing (Battiste, 2002; Munroe, Borden, Orr, Toney, & Meader, 2013; CCL, 2007).

## Theme 2: Promotion of Health and Well-being

Poverty (and its consequences of food insecurity, poor housing and homelessness) is linked to poor health outcomes; however, people can still perceive their health as good in spite of adverse socio-economic conditions. This is because health is more than the absence of physical symptoms, but includes mental and social well-being. For Indigenous peoples, health and well-being is conceived of holistically (as a balance of the mind, body and spirit), and it is relational, based on an individual's connections with his/her family, community and the environment (Loiselle & Lauretta, 2006). In Canada, health status is often measured by 'perceived health', a subjective measure which captures not only physical illness but also reflects well-being across dimensions of health relevant to the individual (Statistics Canada, 2016a). From the Canadian Community Health Surveys conducted between 2011 and 2014, 48.5% of First Nations, 51.8% of Métis, and 44.4% of Inuit perceived they had good health, compared to 62% of non-Indigenous peoples (Statistics Canada, 2016a).

Health perception is influenced by any illnesses an individual may have, his/her socio-economic circumstances, and/or resiliency to cope. As a result of the intergenerational impacts of colonial

policies such as the residential school system, adverse social and judicial policies, and the child welfare system, many Indigenous people in Canada face prevalent adverse socio-economic conditions and a myriad of physical and mental health issues. While colonialism is not the sole cause of disease and illness among Indigenous peoples, it has contributed to disproportionately high levels of some illnesses through the creation of social, environmental and economic conditions which increase the prevalence of risk factors for specific illnesses. These illnesses include cardiovascular diseases (hypertension, heart diseases and stroke), diabetes and obesity, infectious diseases, communicable diseases (HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis, sexually transmitted diseases [STDs]), and cancers (Earle, 2011; PHAC, 2011a).

## Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages (Goal 3)

The third SDG and its targets highlight the need for a reduction in maternal and child mortality (Targets 3.1 & 3.2), communicable and non-communicable diseases (Targets 3.3 & 3.4), preventable injuries from accidents (Targets 3.6), and the abuse of substances such as alcohol, narcotic drugs and tobacco (Targets 3.5). There are striking disparities between Indigenous and non-Indigenous birth outcomes, including macrosomia, perinatal, and infant mortality rates (Gilbert, Auger, & Tjepkema, 2015; Smylie et al., 2010; Xiao, et al., 2016), as well as postneonatal mortality (Smylie et al., 2010). While major gaps exist in the quality and coverage of data on birth outcomes for Indigenous populations, the

available information indicates that on-reserve First Nations, off-reserve status Indians, and Inuit have rates of infant mortality ranging from 1.4 to 4 times that of non-Indigenous infants (Smylie et al., 2010). The disparities are greatest among infants for the postneonatal period, attributed to factors such as congenital conditions, sudden infant death syndrome, and infections, infant health issues that have been disproportionately experienced by subpopulations of Indigenous peoples (Smylie et al., 2010).

One of the challenges in reducing adverse birth outcomes for Indigenous populations is the shortage of maternal health personnel for First Nations and Inuit women living in isolated communities, preventing them from accessing the same level of maternity care as Indigenous women living in urban areas (Lalonde, Butt, & Bucio, 2009). Pregnant Indigenous women are routinely evacuated from such communities to urban centres at 36 weeks gestation to ensure their safety and that of their newborns. This separates mothers from the support of their families and social support networks and situates them in unfamiliar environments, causing stress which can negatively affect their health and well-being. There has been a movement to return<sup>11</sup> maternal care services back to Indigenous communities through establishing a midwifery-led collaborative model of care in birthing centres. Evaluations have shown promising results, including

high rates of participation in prenatal care, the majority of births occurring safely within local communities, and low rates of some adverse birth outcomes (Van Wagner, Epoo, Nastapoka, & Harney, 2007; Van Wagner, Osepchook, Harney, Crosbie, & Tulugak, 2012). This suggests that additional Indigenous-specific indicators may be warranted for Targets 3.1 and 3.2, such as ones focused on the number of communities with birthing centres or on the proportion of Indigenous women who are able to access prenatal care and give birth locally.

Targets 3.3 and 3.4 also have considerable bearing on Indigenous populations who experience disproportionately high rates of HIV/AIDS, respiratory infections such as bronchiolitis, pneumonia and tuberculosis, influenza, hepatitis C, among other communicable diseases (Alvarez, Orr, Wobeser, Cook, & Long, 2014; Kovesi, 2012; PHAC, 2011b, 2015; Uhanova, Tate, Tataryn, & Minuk, 2013). There is a need to address the social origins of many of these illnesses, as well as enhance immunization and surveillance strategies (Kovesi, 2012). At present, Target 3.3 lacks indicators related to rates of immunization, as well as on the incidence of water-borne diseases and other respiratory illnesses beyond tuberculosis.

Indigenous people in Canada are also significantly more likely to die prematurely than non-Indigenous people. The leading causes of death for Indigenous people are

injuries, including those resulting from suicide, motor vehicle accidents, drowning, fire, and homicide, though some of these deaths may also be attributed to alcohol and drug use (Berthelot, Wilkins, & Allard, 2004; Park, Tjepkema, Goedhus, & Pennock, 2015; Tjepkema, Wilkins, Senécal, Guimond, & Penney, 2009). They are also more likely to die because of cancer, diseases of the circulatory system, diabetes mellitus, and infectious diseases like tuberculosis or other respiratory illnesses (Park, Tjepkema, Goedhuis, & Pennock, 2015). They are at increased risk of premature mortality due in part to a greater prevalence of health behavior risk factors such as smoking, alcohol abuse, obesity, and poor diet compared to the general population; the legacy of intergenerational trauma on mental health; as well as residence in rural and remote locations. Again, the role of poverty in poorer health outcomes must be acknowledged, as poverty is associated with food insecurity, low levels of education, low levels of health literacy, and other adverse social conditions that increase the risk for preventable communicable and non-communicable diseases.

Target 3.4 includes a selected number of indicators on mortality rates attributed to cardiovascular disease, cancer, diabetes, chronic respiratory disease, or suicide. It does not, however, include indicators attributed to other causes of premature mortalities for Indigenous populations, such as

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<sup>11</sup> Midwifery was a common practice among Indigenous populations historically, but declined in the mid 1800s due to the development of the obstetrics profession and shifting attitudes about the safety of midwife-attended births (Lalonde et al., 2009). The loss of midwives coupled with the closure or reduction of maternity care services in rural hospitals across Canada since 2000 (Kornelson, Kotaska, Waterfall, Willie, & Wilson, 2010) have resulted in a loss of local maternity services in many Indigenous communities.





fires or drownings (deaths resulting from road traffic accidents are covered under Target 3.6), nor does it include the breadth of indicators needed to capture the scope of mental health issues that may be contributing to high rates of suicide in Indigenous populations, including the prevalence of alcohol and drug addictions, post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, and other mental illnesses. Further, while Target 3.5 calls for strengthening the prevention and treatment of substance abuse, many Indigenous people may not be entitled to the same level of services related to substance abuse treatment interventions that Registered First Nations accessing services on reserve are entitled to. For example, First Nations and Inuit with addiction challenges have access to the federally-funded National Native Alcohol and Drug Abuse and

the National Youth Solvent Abuse programs; however, eligibility for accessing these services is limited to on-reserve populations.

This goal also highlights the need for improved health financing, training and retention of health care workers (Targets 3.c). Recruitment and retention of healthcare workers is an ongoing challenge in rural and remote communities (Browne, n.d.; Kulig, Kilpatrick, Moffitt, & Zimmer, 2015), especially in Indigenous communities where there is also a need for culturally safe and relevant care that reflects Indigenous peoples' beliefs, cultural practices, and languages. In addition to limited access to comprehensive and specialized care in rural and remote regions, many Indigenous people have also had negative experiences with the healthcare system, including racism, discrimination, language

difficulties, intimidation, harassment, and judgmental behaviors (Allan & Smylie, 2015; Cameron, del Pilar Carmargo Plazas, Santos Salas, Bourque Bearskin, & Hungler, 2014; Goodman, et al., 2017). As a result, they may fear or distrust western healthcare professionals and be reluctant to seek out care for their health issues. In order to improve their health and well-being, these barriers to care must be overcome through cultural safety training for non-Indigenous health practitioners and through strategies aimed at improving Indigenous peoples' participation in the health workforce. As such, Indigenous-specific indicators may include the proportion of non-Indigenous health practitioners who have taken cultural safety training and the proportion of the health workforce that is Indigenous.



*For many Indigenous women, addressing equity issues related to education and income are critical for achieving a measure of economic independence, empowerment and self-determination, allowing them to leave abusive family environments or to achieve a better life for them and their children.*

### Theme 3: Equality and social inclusiveness

Social inclusion is defined as “the situation in which individuals or communities (both physical and demographic) are fully involved in the society in which they reside”, and encompasses social, cultural and political dimensions (CMHC, 2007, as cited in Standing Senate Committee on Social Affairs, Science and Technology [SSCSAST], 2013, p. 6). It is not solely about having sufficient financial resources, but also about contributing to community life and having that contribution acknowledged, about not feeling isolated, and about having choice and access to opportunities (SSCSAST, 2013). Indigenous populations face persistent barriers to equity and social inclusion, including racism, discrimination, and inequitable access to education and employment

opportunities, as well as laws and policies that can be seen as being discriminatory. This section will focus on Goals 5 (gender equality), 10 (within and among countries), and 16 (peaceful societies) as they pertain to Indigenous peoples, as Goal 4 (equality and social inclusiveness in education) is discussed in an earlier section and any Indigenous-specific context for Goal 11 (inclusive cities) is captured collectively in other themes.

#### **Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls (Goal 5)**

In the SDG agenda, Goal 5 calls for an end to discrimination against women and girls (Target 5.1), elimination of all forms of gender-based violence (Target 5.2), elimination of forced marriages (Target 5.3), recognition of unpaid and domestic work (Target 5.4), equal and full participation in

political, economic and public spheres of the country (Target 5.5), and the adoption of policies and legislation that promote gender equality and empowerment for women and girls (Target 5.c). This goal is especially pertinent with respect to Indigenous women who are among the most marginalized populations in Canada and face multiple forms of discrimination.

Historically, Indigenous women played vital roles in Indigenous communities. Before colonization, they carried out not only domestic activities, but were often heads of households, played an essential economic role, were crucial in determining leadership, were involved in conflict resolution and decision-making, and made vital contributions to the physical and cultural survival of their communities (Jamieson, 1986, as cited in Carter, 1996; McGrath &



Stevenson, 1996). Women were revered and respected in many Indigenous communities, and family breakdown and violence against women were not commonly reported (Aboriginal Justice Implementation Commission [AJIC], 1999). However, historical circumstances have shaped how Indigenous women are regarded in society, the social, political and economic realities of their lives and, in turn, their physical, emotional and mental health. Following European settlement in what we now call North America, colonial authorities imposed a new social structure that eroded Indigenous cultural values and gender roles (Halseth, 2013). As a result of this new structure, not only were Indigenous people considered an inferior class of people within Canadian society, but Indigenous women were considered an inferior gender within that inferior class (AJIC, 1999). The adoption of the Constitution Act and subsections of the *Indian Act* replaced the matrilineal system with a patriarchal one, and stripped First Nations women of their rights to land and, in some cases, their legal identity as First Nations women.<sup>12</sup> Even though some of the discriminatory aspects of the Indian Act have since been revoked, First Nations women still face multiple forms of racism and discrimination, and the damage done to their image and role in Indigenous societies cannot be easily corrected.

The intergenerational impacts of colonial policies like the imposition of the residential school system, past and current child welfare policies,

and socio-economic marginalization, have differentially impacted the health and well-being of Indigenous women. Indigenous women experience disproportionately higher rates of violence and trauma in their homes compared to Indigenous men and non-Indigenous women, and they are more likely to experience poverty and disadvantage compared to Indigenous men (Halseth, 2013). This makes it challenging to address the issues that affect their health and well-being and achieve equity with Indigenous men and within broader Canadian society. Addressing the myriad of issues and inequities that Indigenous women face will be critical to re-establishing healthy families and communities, as they are the primary caregivers. The implementation and monitoring of Goal 5 within Indigenous communities will therefore augment work that has already begun to address the inequities that women face.

Presently, Indigenous women's role in the community is enhanced by improved access to education, employment and leadership opportunities. In 2011, a higher proportion of Indigenous women had obtained a university degree compared with Indigenous men (Statistics Canada, 2016b). This included 11.1% of First Nations, 13.9% of Métis and 6.8% of Inuit women (Statistics Canada, 2016b). This means that Indigenous women were twice as likely to have a university degree compared to Indigenous men. Unfortunately, these higher rates of education

have not always translated into gender equality in salaries paid, the political discourse, or in the home. In spite of the positive proportional relationship between the level of degree earned and take-home pay, Indigenous women continue to earn less than Indigenous men. In 2011, Indigenous women earned \$7000 less than Indigenous men (a gender gap that also existed between non-Indigenous men and women) (NAEDB, 2015). They also received a larger share of their income from government transfers than men (25% of women's income compared with 13% of men's income) (NAEDB, 2015). For many Indigenous women, addressing equity issues related to education and income are critical for achieving a measure of economic independence, empowerment and self-determination, allowing them to leave abusive family environments or to achieve a better life for themselves and their children.

A gender-based gap also exists in political participation, with Indigenous women under-represented in governments and in local leadership roles. While some Indigenous women have participated in politics at multiple levels and made significant contributions to their communities, Nations, and Canada at large, there is a need to encourage more Indigenous women to participate in leadership roles. Programs such as Ontario's "Building Aboriginal Women's Leadership" aim to address healing from the harmful historical and current conditions of oppression and racism that Indigenous women

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<sup>12</sup> Indigenous women who married non-Indigenous men were no longer considered Indians according to the constitution, but the reverse was not the case with Indigenous men who married non-Indigenous women.



face by addressing the under-representation of women in positions of influence.

Additionally, many Indigenous women are employed as scholars across Canadian universities and in the health care industry. In these roles, they influence policies that impact the health and well-being of women, children and families. As noted by Woroniuk and Lafrenière (2016), women’s meaningful participation is also needed to achieve Goal 16a related to peaceful and inclusive societies. While the current indicators capture multiple dimensions of inequity and social exclusion for Indigenous women and girls, there is currently no indicator related to pay equity and indicators related to equity in opportunities (employment, education, etc.) are very limited. The current targets and indicators also do not fully account for the complexity of violence

against women in rural and remote Indigenous communities, where leaving an abusive situation may be challenging.

The emphasis of Goal 5 is primarily on women and girls, reflecting the binary nature with which the targets address the issue of gender. This gender lens is inadequate in the modern era as it omits minority populations like lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer, transgendered (LGBTQ) and the questioning community, who often face similar, albeit unique, socio-economic marginalization as do women and girls. Among Indigenous people in Canada, individuals who identify themselves as LGBTQ or questioning are typically referred to as “two-spirited” people. In the past, two-spirited people were widely respected and honoured in Indigenous communities and carried unique responsibilities that

were important to the collective well-being of Nations (Hunt, 2016). However, the impacts of colonization have diminished their previously revered position in society and replaced it with multiple and intersecting forms of marginalization based on their sexual and/or gender identity as well as their Indigeneity (Hunt, 2016). This has left considerable impacts to their health and well-being, including high rates of multiple forms of violence, mental health issues, substance abuse, and suicide. The SDG agenda does not make any specific recommendation for this group of people but inclusively refers to the need for gender equality. This is in spite of the fact that two-spirited people are affected by the very inequities the SDG agenda intends to correct including poverty, low levels of education, poor health, discrimination, and racism in non-inclusive societies. While

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*Public services on reserve, including education, health care, and social services, among others, have been chronically underfunded for years, resulting in considerable disparities in health and well-being for Indigenous children and families.*

the SDG agenda lacks reference to LGBTQ populations, LGBTQ activists nevertheless interpret the term “gender” to apply to the unique situation of this group of people. It is hoped that at a national level, targets and indicators can specifically address their health and well-being (Dorey, 2016).

### **Reduce inequality within and among countries (Goal 10)**

SDG 10 includes multiple dimensions of inequality, including income; social, economic and political inclusion; participation in decision-making, laws, policies and practices; among others. Many of these dimensions are targeted at underdeveloped countries, while others (such as aspects of income inequality and social, economic and political inclusion) have been discussed in other sections as they pertain to Indigenous peoples in Canada. This section will focus primarily on Target 10.3, “ensure equal opportunity and reduce inequalities of outcome, including by eliminating discriminatory laws,

policies and practices and promoting appropriate legislation, policies and actions in this regard.” This dimension of inequity is unique to Indigenous peoples, as no other ethnic group in Canada has been, and continues to be, subjected to such a long history of discriminatory laws and policies, as well as human rights violations.

Indigenous peoples in Canada have had a long history of colonialism which has left them socially, economically and politically marginalized. This includes the *Indian Act* of 1867, the forced removal of Indigenous children into residential schools, the dispossession of Indigenous lands and forced relocations to reserves, and other laws, policies and practices aimed at assimilating Indigenous peoples into the mainstream and weakening their societies, economies and governments (Moss & Gardner-O’Toole, 1987; Orkin, 2003). Public services on reserve, including education, health care, and social services, among others, have been chronically underfunded for years,

resulting in considerable disparities in health and well-being for Indigenous children and families. In response to inequitable funding in the child welfare system, in which Indigenous children are vastly over-represented and constitute almost half of all children in foster care (Turner, 2016), in 2007 the First Nations Child and Family Caring Society [FNCFCFS] of Canada and the Assembly of First Nations (AFN) filed a human rights complaint against the Canadian government. Despite the tribunal’s ruling on January 26, 2016 that the government had, in fact, been discriminating against First Nations children by underfunding child welfare services on reserve and failing to implement Jordan’s Principle, the federal government continues to fail to properly comply with the ruling (AFN, 2016).

The dispossession of Indigenous peoples’ from their lands has also been a well-recognized contributor to the inequities Indigenous peoples face. Various Supreme Court judgements have stipulated



that unceded Indigenous lands and rights require specific legislation or agreements to extinguish them, and that they cannot be distinguished without consultation with Indigenous peoples and their consent. Additionally, Aboriginal and treaty rights have been entrenched into Section 35 the *Constitution Act* of 1982. Nevertheless, there have been many instances of failing to protect Indigenous peoples' lands and resource rights in the face of natural resource extraction and development activities. Some scholars even argue that the intention of comprehensive land claims is not to recognize Indigenous rights, but rather to serve as another tool for dispossessing Indigenous peoples of their lands due to the power resource development companies and non-Indigenous governments are able to exert over economically disadvantaged Indigenous communities seeking to enhance well-being for their citizens (see for example, Samson, 2016). Additionally, there is also the issue of recognizing Métis indigenous rights, something which continues to be in contradiction with the Canadian Constitution's recognition of Métis as one of three distinct

Indigenous populations. It is hoped that a 2016 ruling by the Supreme Court of Canada, known as the Daniels Decision, which declared that Métis and non-status Indians are 'Indians' under section 91(24) of the Constitution (INAC, 2016), will rectify this contradiction and ensure the federal government assumes its fiduciary duty to them and ensures they are consulted and negotiated with in good faith on issues that affect them.

The examples above are but a select sample of the legal, policy, and practice context of inequities for Indigenous peoples in Canada and highlight the importance of Target 10.3. However, there is only one indicator by which this target is measured: "the proportion of the population reporting having personally felt discriminated against or harassed within the 12 months on the basis of a ground of discrimination prohibited under international human rights law." While this indicator may be sufficient for capturing isolated instances of discrimination and/or harassment as reported to Human Rights Tribunals or the justice system, it is insufficient for capturing the scope and scale of

discrimination and racism that Indigenous peoples experience within economic, social and political settings; through federal and provincial laws, policies, and services provision; within law enforcement, justice, education, child welfare, and health care systems; in the media; and elsewhere. This indicator also fails to account for the deep power imbalances which exist between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples. Addressing these sources of inequity for Indigenous peoples will require structural change, as well as developing a deeper understanding among non-Indigenous populations of the underlying sources of socio-economic marginalization and health inequities for Indigenous peoples and the role that power plays in perpetuating them.

**Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels (Goal 16)**

Sustainable development is intricately connected to peaceful and inclusive societies (UN, 2015). When people are able to live without fear of violence or discrimination, have equal access





to the resources they need to contribute to their communities and society at large, and when their communities enable them to flourish spiritually, culturally, emotionally and intellectually, it creates an environment where innovation is encouraged and economic growth can occur. SDG 16, with its 12 targets, addresses human rights and the ways political and legal systems can protect them (Craig, 2016). In particular, this goal calls for an end to violence, child abuse (Target 16.2), as well as for non-discriminatory policies and inclusive representation and participation across all levels of governance (Target 16.7). The historical practices of European colonial settlement have had major consequences for Indigenous women, children, youth, families and communities in the form of high rates of violence against Indigenous women, child abuse, and incarceration.

Violence against Indigenous women has been identified as a national human rights crisis, with Indigenous

women having the highest rates of gender-based violence in Canada (Amnesty International, 2014). Indigenous women are three times more likely to report violence than non-Indigenous women, and the forms of the violence they experience are more likely to be severe and result in injury or death (Brennan, 2011). Indigenous women comprise a disproportionate number of missing and murdered women cases in Canada. As of April 2015, 10% of all missing women were Indigenous, yet Indigenous women make up 4% of the female Canadian population (Arriagada, 2016). The most common cause of violence against Indigenous women is lateral violence<sup>13</sup> (Royal Canadian Mounted Police, 2015), which is traced to the influence of colonization and intergenerational trauma.

This issue has received considerable policy attention. On September 15, 2015, the federal government announced a five-year *Action Plan to Address Family Violence and Violent Crimes against Aboriginal Women and*

*Girls*. Supported by nearly \$200 million, the Action Plan supports a range of initiatives and measures aimed at preventing violence by supporting community level solutions; supporting Indigenous victims of violence by providing appropriate services; and protecting Indigenous women and girls by investing in shelters and improving Canada's law enforcement and justice systems (Government of Canada, 2014a). Funding for innovative community-based and school-based initiatives that reduce vulnerabilities to violence and awareness activities aimed at breaking intergenerational cycles of violence and abuse affecting Indigenous women and girls is made available through the *Justice Partnership and Innovation Program - Violence against Aboriginal Women and Girls* initiative (Government of Canada, 2016a). Nevertheless, it is clear that policies that address gender-based violence must recognize the interrelated nature of this form of violence with poverty, housing, homelessness and child abuse.

<sup>13</sup> Lateral violence is a learned behavior where people abuse their own people in ways similar to how they have been abused in the past.



The impacts of colonialism have also led to disproportionately higher rates of exposure to the child welfare, judicial and criminal justice systems. Indigenous children account for less than 6% of the child population in Canada, but comprise an estimated 26% of children placed in out-of-home care (Government of Canada, 2015). In some provinces and territories, this percentage reaches 60% to 78%. In fact, First Nations children are two and a half times more likely to be placed in out-of-home-care than non-Indigenous children (Blackstock, Brown, & Bennet, 2007). Children placed in out-of-home care are reported to experience cultural abuse, physical abuse, sexual abuse and mental illnesses.

Indigenous people are also increasingly over-represented in the prison system. In 2015, they comprised 24.4% of the inmate population in federal penitentiaries compared to 4.3% for the Canadian population, an increase of 50% over the preceding decade (Government

of Canada, 2015; Green, 2017). Compared to non-Indigenous Canadians, Indigenous offenders are younger, have less formal education, and are more likely to have a previous history of substance abuse and/or addiction, a mental illness, a previous youth sentence, and a history of domestic and/or physical abuse and gang related offences (Government of Canada, 2015). These rates of incarceration are expected to continue to rise because they are predominantly youth-driven. The unique circumstances and social histories of Indigenous peoples, and their interaction with colonial settlers, gives rise to higher and unequal rates of offending and victimization. This is aggravated further by child welfare, judicial, and criminal systems that are dominated by the worldviews, languages and structures of the colonizer and fail to take into account the root causes of high incarceration and child apprehension rates – namely socio-economic marginalization, substance abuse, and family violence, all of which

are the result of intergenerational trauma (AHF, 2005; Government of Canada, 2014b). To address these issues, the criminal, judicial and child welfare systems must be made more culturally appropriate and sensitive (AHF, 2005; Government of Canada, 2015). This requires utilizing more holistic approaches that incorporate Indigenous worldviews and practices and foster self-determination, such as Indigenous Justice Systems,<sup>14</sup> sentencing circles, family conferencing circles, and kinship care. However, there may be cases where Indigenous approaches may not be wanted or work well; therefore, in cases where Indigenous people must still interact with mainstream child welfare, judicial and criminal systems, there is a need for practices that will make their interactions more culturally safe and improve trust and relationships, such as system-wide cultural safety training, use of interpreters, or Indigenous legal representatives.

The SDGs are fundamental to

<sup>14</sup> Indigenous Justice Systems or programs are community-based justice systems that offer alternative legal proceedings to mainstream justice processes to assist Indigenous people exert greater responsibility over the administration of justice in their communities (Department of Justice, 2017).

achieving equity and fairness in the child welfare, criminal and justice systems. Target 16.b requires the promotion and enforcement of non-discriminatory laws and policies, including reformation of the police system and policies that address racism. It also requires addressing issues of child and adult education, meaningful employment, and accessible health and social services if Canada is to effectively decrease the rates of Indigenous offenders and make Indigenous communities and Canada more peaceful and safe for all (Green, 2017). Additionally, Target 10.3 and its associated indicator, which focuses on the reporting of discrimination and harassment, could also be used to improve the monitoring of instances of the implementation of Jordan's Principle to enhance equity and fairness in child welfare and health.

#### Theme 4: The Environment

Economic growth, social issues and the environment are inter-related. Preservation of the environment is an integral part of sustainable development, as industrialization and economic growth can have detrimental effects on the environment if not checked. The environment in which people live can also have detrimental effects on their wealth and well-being.

SDGs related to the environment include SDG 6 (water and sanitation), 7 (energy), 12 (sustainable consumption patterns), 13 (climate), 14 (oceans, seas and marine resources), and 15 (preserving terrestrial species and ecosystems). While a detailed discussion of these goals is beyond the scope of this report, this section will provide a

brief description of the impact of Goals 6 and 13 on the health and well-being of Indigenous peoples.

#### **Ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all (Goal 6)**

With approximately 7% of the world's total renewable freshwater supply, Canada has an abundance of available water (Government of Canada, 2017a). Water is very important to resource extraction, energy generation, and manufacturing industries in Canada. It is linked to several SDGs, including sustainable production of energy (SDG 7), infrastructure and technology development (SDG 9), economic growth (SDG 8), and sustainable production and consumption patterns (SDG 12). Changes in the climate (SDG 13) and marine and ocean biodiversity (SDG 14) are also linked to water conservation. Despite this abundance of water, the availability of safe drinking water is not equitable across Canada.

The availability of safe drinking water is a critical issue affecting the health of many Indigenous communities. Between 2004 and 2014, 400 of 618 First Nations communities were under Drinking Water Advisories (DWA), which required that they boil their water before drinking it (Levasseur & Marcoux, 2015). At the end of 2016, an estimated one in four First Nations communities were under a DWA (Lui, 2017a). Some communities have been under a DWA for a very long time; for example, the Neskantanga First Nation in Ontario has had unsafe drinking water for over 20 years

(Levasseur & Marcoux, 2015). SDG 6, and its associated targets, is therefore an important goal for Indigenous peoples in Canada over the next fifteen years.

The Government of Canada is committed to providing safe drinking water and sanitation for all its citizens, and to preserving waterways and ocean-based species. One of the goals in the Federal Sustainable Development Strategy (FSDS) is the provision of safe drinking water to affected Indigenous communities. The government hopes to do this by investing in water infrastructure, engaging in sustainable agricultural practices, and protecting the lakes and waters in partnership with Indigenous peoples. The target is that by March 31, 2019 and March 31, 2021, 60% and 100% respectively of the DWAs affecting First Nation communities will be resolved (Government of Canada, 2016b). Similarly, the federal government resolves to preserve lakes and rivers by reducing pollution at the source, limiting the use of phosphate in household cleaning agents, monitoring water quality, investing in infrastructure, and enforcing national regulations they developed on sewage treatment in collaboration with the provinces and municipalities (Government of Canada, 2016b).

Nevertheless, achieving this goal will be challenging in light of the federal government's acceptance of all but 11 recommendations proposed by the Standing Committee on Transport, Infrastructure and Communities related to the Navigation Protection Act tabled in the House of Commons on March



23, 2017 (Government of Canada, 2017b). In 2012, a decision by the Harper Conservative Government to remove 99% of lakes and rivers from the list of protected waterways was reflected in a renaming of the Navigable Waters Protection Act to the Navigation Protection Act (NPA).

Environmentalists hoped that the new Liberal government would act on its campaign promises to restore lost protections and incorporate more modern safeguards (Lui, 2017b). Rather than restoring protections, however, the federal government accepted the Committee's first recommendation to "maintain the Schedule<sup>15</sup> but rapidly improve the process of adding waterways to the Schedule by making it easily accessible, easy to use and transparent" (Government of Canada, 2017b, p. 4) This decision effectively indicates that the government is choosing the privatization of resources over the preservation of ecology by approving the activities like the Trans Mountain pipeline, the Site C mega dam, and Trans Canada's NOVA gas pipeline (Lui, 2017a). This means that private industries approved by the government can extract resources and inadvertently pollute these waterways without any recourse to their actions. This decision was made in spite of the present government's international commitments to sustainable development and over Indigenous peoples' concerns that the NPA violates their treaty and water rights (and thus violates the UNDRIP) (Suzuki & Barlow, 2017).

Challenging decisions and tradeoffs like these need to be made over the course of the next 15 years. It is important, therefore, to realize that economic growth will come at a cost not only to the environment, but to the Indigenous communities living on and depending on the land. Preservation of our waterways should be seen as an action that impacts all Canadians.

### **Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts (Goal 13)**

Across Canada, adverse climate changes have led to a rise in global air and ocean temperature, rising sea levels, and frequent and severe wildfires, storms, heat waves and pest outbreaks. These climatic changes affect all Canadians, but uniquely affect northern Indigenous peoples because of their remoteness and their strong relationship to the land. Climate change has the potential to impact traditional lifestyles, resource development, and conservation, as well as infrastructure related to transportation, water and waste disposal, housing, and health (Ogden & Johnson, 2002). For example, in northern Ontario, a region of 24,000 people of whom 90% are First Nations (Government of Ontario, 2017), warm winter weathers resulting from climatic changes have led to delays in the formation of ice roads, stopping all development projects, reducing food supplies and the provision of diesel for use as energy, and blocking the transportation of building materials required for building a nursing center at Sandy Lake First Nation Community (Porter, 2017).

In 2014, the Department of Environment in Nunavut released a report on the challenging situation posed by climate change for Inuit in the territory (Government of Nunavut, 2014). This report revealed that air and ocean temperatures in the region are rising at two times the global rate. This rise has resulted in changes to the distinctive features of the land, seas, ice and biodiversity, in turn affecting food security, shelter, and the supply and availability of clean air and safe water. Inuit culture is also affected by this change, with many Elders reporting that changes in climate do not fit with their traditional knowledge of the weather and land area, which is affecting traditional activities such as hunting, fishing, and gathering (Government of Nunavut, 2014). Biodiversity loss is exacerbated by the introduction of new species or organisms that can lead to new diseases. Unstable ice roads resulting from a change in temperature also increase the risk of physical injuries (Government of Nunavut, 2014). While much of the research on climate change impacts is focused on northern Indigenous people, southern Indigenous people are also greatly impacted by the effect of climate change, including increased safety risks resulting from increased weather-related events like flooding and wildfires, loss of traditional foods and medicines, loss of Indigenous knowledge related to traditional food gathering activities, loss of cultural sites due to rising sea levels, and other impacts on traditional Indigenous economies which perpetuate poverty and inequality (Center for Indigenous Environmental Resources, 2009).

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<sup>15</sup> The 'Schedule' refers to the list of water bodies currently protected under the Navigation Protection Act.

Adapting to the impacts of climate change is therefore a priority for many Indigenous communities. Partnerships formed both locally and nationally are integral to tackling the impacts of climate on the health and well-being of Indigenous peoples.

### 4.3 The importance of partnerships

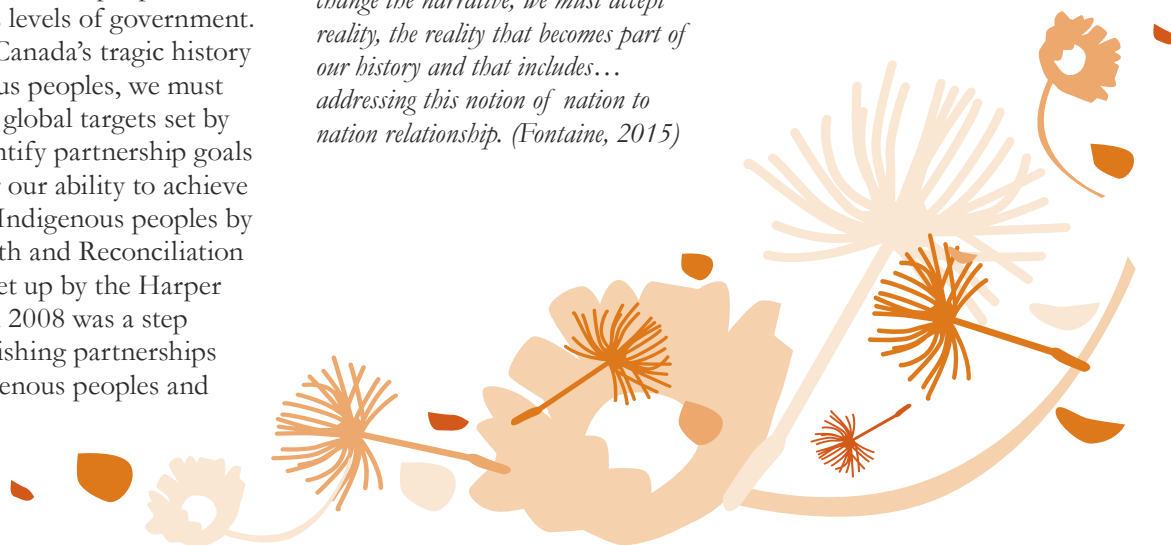
Partnership remains one of the cornerstones of the SDG resolution. Goal 17 aims to “strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the global partnership for sustainable development.” This includes partnerships within and between countries. In Canada, partnerships may include collaborations among different Indigenous Nations and communities, and relationships between settler allies and Indigenous peoples. Partnerships between Indigenous people in Canada and various international actors, or among different groups of Indigenous people, are beyond the scope of this report; instead, this section will focus on partnerships and collaborations among Indigenous and settler peoples, and among various levels of government. As a result of Canada’s tragic history with Indigenous peoples, we must go beyond the global targets set by the UN to identify partnership goals that will foster our ability to achieve the SDGs for Indigenous peoples by 2030. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission set up by the Harper government in 2008 was a step towards establishing partnerships between Indigenous peoples and

settler allies to improve relationships within Canada. It was a recognition of the abuse Indigenous peoples have suffered and a desire to foster relationships to right the wrongs done to Indigenous peoples over the previous decades.

Partnership occurs when people come together to advance mutual interests through collaboration and cooperation. This collaboration cannot be based on “us” and “them” narratives, but rather on complementary actions to redress poverty nationally and among Indigenous peoples, and to narrow the socio-economic and health gaps between Indigenous and non-Indigenous populations. Phil Fontaine, a consultant on the national and international scene on Indigenous issues, a member of the Board of Directors of the Pierre Elliot Trudeau Foundation, and a three-time appointed National Chief of the Assembly of First Nations said that reconciliation:

*includes knowing, it includes learning, it includes understanding and accepting the truth of the situation.... we have to change our origin story, we have to change the narrative, we must accept reality, the reality that becomes part of our history and that includes... addressing this notion of nation to nation relationship. (Fontaine, 2015)*

For partnerships to be successful in tackling actions on the SDGs, there must be a collective acknowledgement of the past and awareness of where the country wants to go; efforts must be made to engage and build consensus with Indigenous peoples; and community-driven and nation-based programs that involve working with Indigenous peoples rather than for them must be emphasized (Johnson, Ulrich, Cross & Greenwood, 2016). Furthermore, increasing Indigenous peoples’ involvement in decision-making by increasing their representation in leadership, along with a renewed commitment to improving health and social services for communities on reserve, off reserve and in urban areas, is key to achieving the 2030 agenda. Building effective partnerships will also entail cutting across all levels of government, health and social systems, and involving leadership and frontline workers. This system-wide transformation is possible when respectful relationships are formed.



## 4.4 Recommendations

A number of recommendations emerged from the literature, policy documents, and experts on how to address some of the SDG issues identified in this report of relevance for Indigenous peoples in Canada. Underscoring these recommendations is a recognition that poverty and inequitable access to services are crosscutting themes that resonate with the four major categories of SDGs. The recommendations include:



- Poverty alleviation among Indigenous peoples should be redefined from the narrow, income-based, individualistic perspective framed in the SDG document to reflect community poverty, and should be framed as a human rights issue (BCCIC, 2017; Dignity for All, 2015) such that the strategies employed do not tackle poverty alleviation as a charitable venture (BCCIC, 2017). This national poverty framework requires consultation with academia, civil society, vulnerable populations, Indigenous peoples and communities which will be impacted by the anti-poverty policy.
- Since all provinces and territories have an antipoverty plan (with the exception of British Columbia), this national anti-poverty framework should be integrated into what already exists within the provinces or territories and complement existing strategies (Dignity for All, 2015).
- Federal government spending for poverty eradication should be holistic, encompassing funding in early childhood education and care, food security in northern and remote areas, housing, education, and transportation infrastructure, as well as income assistance for low-income individuals and families living below the poverty line (Dignity for all, 2015).
- In addition to a national poverty strategy, a national housing/homelessness strategy is currently under development. This strategy should be framed as a human rights issue (BCCIC, 2017; Dignity for All, 2015). Additionally, it should include increased accountability and collaboration among government officials and corporate/NGO actors; improve and increase shelter standards; address capacity challenges and lack of staffing; increase housing options for the homeless; and incorporate a concerted public health response to alcohol and drug use, such as promoting efficiently run alcohol and needle exchange programs (Patrick, 2014).
- Innovative solutions should be developed to the restrictive policies that prohibit the sale of land on reserve areas<sup>16</sup> and other preventative measures that address homelessness such as unemployment, low education and the high rates of incarceration.
- Indigenous-specific SDG targets and indicators should be developed, including targets on community poverty, food security, health and well-being, education, gender equality, water and sanitation (UNPFII, 2016).
- While the federal government has recently released its *Strategy to Address Gender-based Violence*,<sup>17</sup> it does not appear to focus on the structural or root causes of violence against Indigenous women, nor on the specific challenges they face in dealing with, or leaving, abusive situations. A uniquely Indigenous strategy is needed to target gender-based violence in Indigenous communities, which is a significant cause of poverty among Indigenous women and children.

<sup>16</sup> In response to “restrictive policies that put Indigenous Peoples at a disadvantage in the housing market (preventing them from buying or building their own homes), Six Nations First Nation has used Certificates of Possession (CPs) to allow community members to lawfully possess land tracts on reserves. CPs are then used to obtain home building or improvement loans under two housing programs administered by Six Nations (the Six Nations Revolving Loan Fund and the Bank of Montréal and Royal Bank On-Reserve Housing Loan Programs)” (Alcantara 2005 as cited in Patrick, 2014, p. 16).

<sup>17</sup> See <http://www.swc-cfc.gc.ca/violence/strategy-strategie/index-en.html>



- Self-determination (the right to make decisions on activities, health and well-being) and self-governance should be included in the measurement of indicators of poverty among Indigenous peoples (BCCIC, 2017).
- The UNDRIP that was adopted in 2016, especially sections related to Indigenous peoples' right to self-governance, should be implemented by the federal government (BCCIC, 2017).
- Effective strategies should be developed to address the high school dropout rates among Indigenous youth.
- Investments must be made to improve educational infrastructure on reserve to levels that are equal to those off reserve.
- The fairness of judicial hearings and the overrepresentation of Indigenous peoples in prisons must be addressed by investing in Indigenous judicial systems and correctional services that offer a holistic approach to the reintegration of offenders.
- Social assistance to northern and remote Indigenous communities must be increased.
- Federal spending must be increased to address food insecurity for First Nations, Inuit and Métis peoples.
- The beneficial gains of partnership within and between Indigenous communities, non-Indigenous communities, governments, universities, industries and others must be harnessed to ensure sustainability. Examples of successful partnerships between Indigenous peoples and governments include the “Haida Watchmen” and “West Coast Trail Guardians;” two initiatives that ensured responsible use of resources (one a fishery, the other a national park) while providing employment for the surrounding Indigenous communities (Lowan-Trudeau, 2016).<sup>18</sup>
- All of the 94 Calls to Action identified by Truth and Reconciliation Commission must be implemented (see TRC, 2015).
- Finally, efficient data systems are needed to track the progress made to achieve the SDG goals (UNPFII, 2016). This involves building capacity within Indigenous organizations and standardizing the terms of data collected to ensure transparency and comparability among Indigenous communities and across Canada. In order to track progress to achieving the SDGs, there is also a need for a centralized national system or website to highlight Canada's progress in meeting the SDGs. This platform can act as a one-stop place to access all the links for other websites that report on Canada's progress in attaining the seventeen goals.

<sup>18</sup> Other partnership examples include the Whitecap Dakota, Muskeg Lake Cree, and Lac La Ronge First Nations who came together to develop a golf course and a casino (Government of Canada, 2010), as well as the many successful partnerships that various Mi'kmaq bands have established with their non-Indigenous neighbouring communities, other levels of governments and departments, universities, and industries to support economic development (Lori Ann Roness Consulting, 2010).



*The goal of the sustainable development agenda is to leave no one behind.... In Canada, the legal precedence of a nation-to-nation agreement will need to be addressed seriously for effective negotiations and the development of partnerships to achieve this agenda.*





## 5.0 CONCLUSIONS



The goal of the sustainable development agenda is to leave no one behind. While the agenda is comprehensive enough to address many of the issues faced by Indigenous peoples in Canada, it is clear that in Canada, this cannot be achieved without addressing the unique issues affecting Indigenous peoples. In particular, poverty has been identified as a recurring theme that has led to inequality within the country, and poverty alleviation strategies must be comprehensive enough to address the various situations that lead to and result from poverty. In Canada, the legal precedence of a nation-to-nation agreement will need to be addressed seriously for effective negotiations and the development of partnerships to achieve this agenda. While Canada has notably been a forerunner on environmental conservation, issues on environmental conservation and development must be critically addressed with reference to impingement on the rights of Indigenous peoples. International documents like the UNDRIP and the International Labour Organization's Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention, 1989 (No. 169), as well as national documents like the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's report and recommendations can help guide respectful and meaningful discourse nationally for Indigenous peoples in Canada. Over the next fifteen years of the 2030 SDG agenda, civil society will be an active force in monitoring and reporting on Canada's progress to achieve the SDGs. However, a major drawback with this agenda is the silence it maintains on specific Indigenous issues like self-determination and governance, and on Indigenous land rights and ownership. These issues are the foundations for inequality and poverty among Indigenous peoples, and failing to address them will mean that strategies to alleviate poverty and address inequities will not be effective. It is hoped that on a national level in Canada, Indigenous-specific targets can be drawn to ensure that Indigenous peoples are not left behind in the sustainability agenda.



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