

# Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC)

And

## Social Determinants of Health (SDOH):

### A preliminary discussion paper



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In 2015, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) made 94 recommendations as a call to action to “redress the legacy of residential schools and advance the process of Canadian reconciliation” ([http://www.trc.ca/websites/trcinstitution/File/2015/Findings/Calls\\_to\\_Action\\_English2.pdf](http://www.trc.ca/websites/trcinstitution/File/2015/Findings/Calls_to_Action_English2.pdf)). The TRC identifies the need to “fully adopt and implement the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples as the framework for reconciliation.” The UN Declaration was first adopted in 2007 as an “important step forward for the recognition, promotion and protection of the rights and freedoms of indigenous peoples” ([http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/unpfii/documents/DRIPS\\_en.pdf](http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/unpfii/documents/DRIPS_en.pdf)).

These foundational documents deal with many aspects of daily life affecting Indigenous peoples including **self-determination, child welfare, economic development, justice, culture, language and education** which are all important **social determinants** of health as defined in the World Health Organization’s Ottawa Charter for Health Promotion (<http://www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/ph-sp/docs/charter-chartre/pdf/charter.pdf>) and Final Report of the Commission on the Social Determinants of Health ([http://www.who.int/social\\_determinants/final\\_report/csdh\\_finalreport\\_2008.pdf](http://www.who.int/social_determinants/final_report/csdh_finalreport_2008.pdf)).

This discussion paper aims to draw upon many of the elements discussed in the TRC call to action and the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, to highlight what action might be taken by communities in Eeyou Istchee to further promote health and well-being of their population through concerted and intersectoral action on the social determinants of health.

### **Reducing health inequities through action on the social determinants**

Indeed, the TRC calls for action to “identify and close the gaps in health outcomes between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal communities... including infant mortality, maternal health, suicide, mental health, addictions, life expectancy, birth rates, infant and child health issues, chronic diseases, illness and injury incidence, and the availability of appropriate health services.” However, making progress in improving population health and reducing health inequities, requires an understanding of the complex web of causes that lead to poor health, and the “upstream” actions that can be taken to influence the conditions of daily life in which people live (i.e. the **social determinants of health**).

### **The important role of community development in promoting health and well-being**

For this reason, community development is a key action area for shaping the environments that affect people’s daily lives and **making these environments more supportive** to promote health and well-being for each and every member of the community, especially those that are particularly vulnerable (e.g. young children, people living in poverty, those who do not have enough to eat, people with mental health challenges and addictions, people who are socially isolated). According to the UN Declaration, Articles 21 and 23:

“Indigenous peoples have the right, without discrimination, to the improvement of their economic and social conditions, including ... in the areas of education, employment, vocational training and retraining, housing, sanitation, health and social

security... Particular attention shall be paid to the rights and special needs of indigenous elders, women, youth, children and persons with disabilities... Indigenous peoples have the right to determine and develop priorities and strategies for exercising their right to development. In particular, indigenous peoples have the right to be actively involved in developing and determining health, housing and other economic and social programmes affecting them and, as far as possible, to administer such programmes through their own institutions.”

Therefore, there is an important role for Indigenous communities at the local level to take control over their health and its determinants, with the support from regional, provincial and federal governments.

### **Child health, welfare and well-being – the bedrock of a healthy community**

**Children are the future of all communities**, and as such, their health, welfare and well-being are a central concern and an important starting point when it comes to community development. The TRC calls for “culturally appropriate parenting programs... [and] early childhood education programs for Aboriginal families,” as well as “reducing the number of Aboriginal children in [foster] care.” The TRC “affirms the right of Aboriginal governments to establish and maintain their own child-welfare agencies... [and] take the residential school legacy into account in their decision making.” They also recommend “community-based youth organizations to deliver programs on reconciliation.”

### **The right to education and employment for all**

The TRC calls for concerted efforts to “**eliminate educational and employment gaps** between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Canadians.” This includes: “improving education attainment levels and success rates, developing culturally appropriate curricula, protecting the right to Aboriginal languages ... [and] enabling parental and community responsibility, control, and accountability, similar to what parents enjoy in public school systems.” According to the UN declarations:

“Indigenous individuals, particularly children, have the right to all levels and forms of education of the State without discrimination. States shall, in conjunction with indigenous peoples, take effective measures, for indigenous individuals, particularly children, including those living outside their communities, to have access, when possible, to an education in their own culture and provided in their own language.”

In terms of employment, the TRC identifies the need to “ensure that Aboriginal peoples have equitable access to jobs, training, and education opportunities in the corporate sector, and that Aboriginal communities gain long-term sustainable benefits from economic development projects.” There is a need for “increasing equitable access for Aboriginal peoples to jobs, leadership positions, and professional development opportunities.”

## Language and culture strengthen resilience

According to the TRC, “Aboriginal languages are a fundamental and valued element of Canadian culture and society, and there is an urgency to preserve them... The preservation, revitalization, and strengthening of Aboriginal languages and cultures are best managed by Aboriginal people and communities.” According to Article 31 of the UN declaration:

“Indigenous peoples have the right to maintain, control, protect and develop their cultural heritage, traditional knowledge and traditional cultural expressions, as well as the manifestations of their sciences, technologies and cultures, including human and genetic resources, seeds, medicines, knowledge of the properties of fauna and flora, oral traditions, literatures, designs, sports and traditional games and visual and performing arts. They also have the right to maintain, control, protect and develop their intellectual property over such cultural heritage, traditional knowledge, and traditional cultural expressions.”

Indeed, there is a very large and growing scientific literature on the importance of culture and language in strengthening resilience and promoting health and well-being for Indigenous peoples.

## Freedom from structural discrimination

Structural discrimination against Indigenous peoples is an unfortunate reality, even within the Canadian health care system. The TRC makes multiple references throughout their call to action document on the need to **promote cultural competency training**, including for all health care workers, as well as school teachers, business managers and staff, public servants, and others, through:

“appropriate cultural competency training, which includes the history and legacy of residential schools, the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, Treaties and Aboriginal rights, Indigenous law, and Aboriginal – Crown relations. This will require skills-based training in intercultural competency, conflict resolution, human rights, and anti-racism.”

As well, it is important to sensitize the broader public in general through “developing and implementing Kindergarten to Grade Twelve curriculum and learning resources on Aboriginal peoples in Canadian history, and the history and legacy of residential schools.” The UN declaration states that:

“Indigenous peoples have the right to the dignity and diversity of their cultures, traditions, histories and aspirations which shall be appropriately reflected in education and public information... States shall take effective measures, in consultation and cooperation with the indigenous peoples concerned, to combat prejudice and eliminate discrimination and to promote tolerance, understanding and good relations among indigenous peoples and all other segments of society.”

This includes how things are portrayed in the media. The TRC recommends “dedicated news coverage and online public information resources on issues of concern to Aboriginal peoples and all Canadians.”

### **Breaking the complex web of trauma, addictions, violence and incarceration**

The TRC document addresses a complex issue that crosses over multiple sectors and jurisdictions. This issue involves how certain addictions can be used as a way of numbing the pain relating to psychological trauma, which then inadvertently can lead to downstream problems such as fetal alcohol spectrum disorder (FASD) as well as more violence and incarceration, which is often not helpful in improving the situation for the perpetrator nor for the victim, when what is really required is addressing the underlying traumas that leads to the addictions / violence in the first place. The TRC document recommends “eliminating the overrepresentation of Aboriginal people in custody” and especially Aboriginal youth and offenders with FASD. There is a need to:

“implement and evaluate community sanctions that will provide realistic alternatives to imprisonment for Aboriginal offenders and respond to the underlying causes of offending... [as well, to] work with Aboriginal communities to provide culturally relevant services to inmates on issues such as substance abuse, family and domestic violence, and overcoming the experience of having been sexually abused.”

The TRC considers there is a need to “publish data on the criminal victimization of Aboriginal people, including data related to homicide and family violence victimization” to get a better picture of the magnitude and extent of the problem which often goes under-reported. There is also a need for “Aboriginal-specific victim programs and services with appropriate evaluation mechanisms... and to develop, in collaboration with Aboriginal people, FASD preventive programs that can be delivered in a culturally appropriate manner.” The TRC also supports the “public inquiry into the causes of, and remedies for, the disproportionate victimization of Aboriginal women and girls.”

### **Individual healing, community healing and commemoration of past traumas**

Addressing the underlying trauma that people and communities have suffered requires a process of healing. The TRC identifies the need to “recognize the **value of Aboriginal healing practices** and use them in the treatment of Aboriginal patients in collaboration with Aboriginal healers and Elders where requested by Aboriginal patients.”

It is well known that **physical activity** is important not only for physical health, but also for promoting mental health and well-being. The TRC recommends to “support reconciliation by ensuring that policies to promote physical activity as a fundamental element of health and well-being, reduce barriers to sports participation, increase the pursuit of excellence in sport, and build capacity in the Canadian sport system, inclusive of Aboriginal peoples.”

There is also a call for “new Aboriginal healing centres to address the physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual harms caused by residential schools.” According to Article 24 of the UN declaration:

“Indigenous peoples have the right to their traditional medicines and to maintain their health practices, including the conservation of their vital medicinal plants, animals and minerals. Indigenous individuals also have the right to access, without any discrimination, to all social and health services. Indigenous individuals have an equal right to the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health. States shall take the necessary steps with a view to achieving progressively the full realization of this right.”

The TRC also recommends local actions to help individuals and families with the grieving process and their ongoing healing journey, for instance to:

“work with the churches and Aboriginal community leaders to inform the families of children who died at residential schools of the child’s burial location, and to respond to families’ wishes for appropriate commemoration ceremonies and markers, and reburial in home communities where requested... develop and implement strategies and procedures for the ongoing identification, documentation, maintenance, commemoration, and protection of residential school cemeteries or other sites at which residential school children were buried.”

As well, there is a need for “Indigenous and non-Indigenous artists to undertake collaborative projects and produce works that contribute to the reconciliation process.”

### **Self-determination and decision-making**

The TRC identifies the **need for greater involvement of Indigenous peoples in creating their own systems, structures and futures**. For example, they call for an “increase the number of Aboriginal professionals working in the health-care field, [as well as the need to] ensure the retention of Aboriginal health-care providers in Aboriginal communities.”

The UN declaration, Article 14, considers that “Indigenous peoples have the right to establish and control their educational systems and institutions providing education in their own languages, in a manner appropriate to their cultural methods of teaching and learning.” Indeed, in every aspect of decision-making that affects people’s daily lives, Indigenous peoples should be involved in the decision-making process. The UN declaration states that:

“Indigenous peoples have the right to participate in decision-making in matters which would affect their rights, through representatives chosen by themselves in accordance with their own procedures, as well as to maintain and develop their own indigenous decision-making institutions. States shall consult and cooperate in good faith with the indigenous peoples concerned through their own representative

institutions in order to obtain their free, prior and informed consent before adopting and implementing legislative or administrative measures that may affect them. Indigenous peoples have the right to maintain and develop their political, economic and social systems or institutions, to be secure in the enjoyment of their own means of subsistence and development, and to engage freely in all their traditional and other economic activities. Indigenous peoples deprived of their means of subsistence and development are entitled to just and fair redress.”

For instance, as concerns economic development projects, the TRC calls for governments to:

“commit to meaningful consultation, building respectful relationships, and obtaining the free, prior, and informed consent of Indigenous peoples before proceeding with economic development projects.”

Thus there is a need for ongoing involvement in decision-making to help shape local communities, as well as improving the health of the broader Indigenous population which includes those affected by “jurisdictional disputes concerning Aboriginal people who do not reside on reserves.”

### **How to put the TRC recommendations into action?**

The TRC call to action and the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples are both very powerful guiding documents. But, how can these recommendations be translated into concrete actions to create more supportive environments for health?

- What concrete actions do you think would be most effective to implement the TRC recommendations?
- How can communities work together to create more supportive environments for health, especially for children and youth?
- What can be done to support young women and future mothers to ensure that they are strong and healthy before getting pregnant to give their children the best start in life?