



Office of the Commissioner of
**INDIGENOUS
LANGUAGES**

First Nations Language Gathering

SUMMARY REPORT

Montreal, Quebec | April 1-2, 2025 | Le Westin Montreal

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SUMMARY REPORT: FIRST NATIONS LANGUAGE GATHERING

The Office of the Commissioner of Indigenous Languages (the Commission) hosted a language gathering on traditional, ancestral, and unceded Kanien'kehá:ka territory to continue the dialogue with First Nations on their language revitalization efforts and better understand the unique linguistic complexities experienced in the region. The language gathering hosted speakers, champions, Elders, youth, language champions, grassroots advocates, educators and community members, all of whom shared their insights on reclaiming, revitalizing, maintaining, and strengthening their languages.

APPROACH

At the core of this gathering was a commitment to honour, amplify, and celebrate the ongoing efforts of First Nations in revitalizing their languages. The gathering served as an important forum for First Nations language champions to share their perspectives and establishing a space grounded in trust and reciprocity was essential to supporting these discussions.

As such, presentations, keynotes and facilitated discussions were designed to reflect this objective, resulting in meaningful insights for the Commission regarding participants' current priorities, challenges, and opportunities related to language revitalization efforts.



OPENING WORDS

The gathering began with words Elder Kevin Deer, who opened the event in a powerful way by sharing his wisdom and grounding the event to the importance of our creation stories woven into our languages. Words of welcome were also shared by Chief David Diabo of the Mohawk Council of Kahnawà:ke and accompanying community members, all of whom highlighted the importance of being immersed in our languages. An Elder present from Kahnawà:ke spoke about the significance of knowing our languages first, because “we will have the ability to speak even ten languages well, just as long as we are able to speak ours first.”

Commissioner Ignace's evening keynote highlighted his personal journey of fighting for Indigenous languages as well as the vision, mandate, and key activities of the Commission in support of language revitalization. The evening of the gathering closed with a powerful performance by Derek Miller, whose music brought the celebration of Indigenous languages to the forefront.

GROUNDING DISCUSSIONS

The second day of the gathering began with the screening of the Commission's *Our Languages, Our Voices* video, which centres the foundational importance of Indigenous languages. Commissioner Ignace also offered brief remarks about the intent of hosting language gatherings across the country.

Director Joan Greyeyes then welcomed all participants, guests, Chiefs, Elders, and community members, thanking them all for taking the time away from their commitments to participate in the gathering. Director Greyeyes shared the journey of the Commission and its activities since opening its offices in 2023, the core of which has been putting Indigenous Peoples' language revitalization efforts at the centre by continuing to host language gatherings across the country. Director Greyeyes also spoke about the importance of understanding all linguistic realities as the work of the Commission continues, which includes the unique regional complexities experienced by English and French speaking First Nations in Quebec.

Director Greyeyes encouraged participants to learn more about the Commission's research and advocacy efforts, all of which ultimately support the efforts of Indigenous Peoples in reclaiming, revitalizing, maintaining, and strengthening their languages. She then highlighted the Commission's upcoming Global Indigenous Languages Summit, WAVES 2025, to be hosted August 11-14, 2025, in Ottawa.



ADEQUACY OF FUNDING

Dr. Daniel Brant delivered a keynote on the existing systems of funding available for Indigenous languages and contrasting it with long-term, sustainable funding models that are required to advance efforts. The keynote highlighted both progress and persistent challenges related to funding for language programs by evaluating successful language revitalization models and identifying key metrics for effective language speaker propagation.

The primary objective of Dr. Brant's research is to generate reliable data demonstrating the need for sustained, adequate, and long-term funding to support Indigenous languages. His findings position immersion programs as the most effective approach to language revitalization, noting encouraging growth in participation from post-secondary institutions.

Despite these advances, the research underscores several pressing concerns. For example, the number of first-language speakers continues to decline rapidly, while the proficiency and authenticity of second-language speakers remain uncertain. Across Canada, many Indigenous language programs face financial strain, with limited resources often directed toward basic program survival rather than expansion or innovation.

Dr. Brant also drew attention to the significant lack of Indigenous language programming in urban areas, where roughly 80% of Indigenous Peoples reside. To bridge this gap, he emphasized the critical role of school boards in advancing Indigenous language education through the development of immersive curricula and supportive learning structures.

The research further warns of a downward trend in financial support for Indigenous languages. Funding for Indigenous languages is frequently short-term and tied to narrow deliverables and timelines, which impacts program sustainability. Forecasted federal funding allocations illustrate this decline, in contrast to the consistent and long-term financial support available for Canada's official languages.



FACILITATED DISCUSSIONS

Dr. Brant's keynote laid the foundation for the facilitated discussions amongst participants, who shared their perspectives and insights regarding the structural needs and resources required to advance their language revitalization work.

Participants collectively highlighted the success of community-driven approaches to Indigenous language revitalization, emphasizing the value of partnerships, land-based programs, and the development of locally created curricula that reflect community priorities rather than external standards.

There was strong agreement that funding structures require greater clarity and accountability, particularly regarding funding criteria. It was also noted that creative community fundraising, such as Bingo, has played a significant role in strengthening local capacity and sustaining programming. Participants also stressed that revitalization efforts extend beyond teaching, encompassing disciplines such as graphic design, music, and the arts, which help embed language more deeply across community life.

Adult immersion programs emerged as a cornerstone of revitalization, supported by the personal commitment of learners and teachers alike. However, participants expressed frustration that decision-makers allocating funds often remain disconnected from the realities faced by language workers on the ground. Short-term and inconsistent funding cycles were identified as major sources of stress, because they prevent programs from planning for the future or addressing long-term community goals. There was consensus that current funding is insufficient and that application processes frequently force initiatives to conform to predefined categories rather than respond to locally identified needs.

Many participants noted encouraging signs of collaboration between universities and communities, with experiential and land-based learning recognized as effective methods of engagement. Yet, despite these efforts, the number of first-language speakers continues to decline, and the fluency of second-language speakers varies significantly. The loss of Elders also represents an irreplaceable loss of knowledge, showing the need for fair and consistent compensation for Elders and teachers whose expertise, though not always credentialed through non-Indigenous system, carries immense value.



Participants further noted that uncertainty around funding duration makes it difficult to build long-term initiatives. As such, Indigenous education initiatives must receive investment on par with Western systems to promote dialogue and accountability. Teacher training and mentorship were identified as vital components for increasing the number of speakers and ensuring that educators understand that Indigenous worldviews and pedagogies, which differ fundamentally from Western approaches.

Finally, participants highlighted the importance of integrating healing, cultural pride, and trauma awareness into revitalization efforts. Initiatives that bring children, youth, and adults together in immersive, community-based contexts were recognized as powerful tools for connection and continuity. Across discussions, the overarching message was clear: long-term, stable funding and culturally grounded, community-led strategies are essential to sustaining Indigenous language revitalization and ensuring that these efforts thrive for generations to come.

YOUTH PERSPECTIVES

Young people have a critical role in language revitalization and intergenerational transmission. As such, a dedicated panel on youth perspectives was offered at the gathering to put a spotlight on their wisdom and experiences.

The participants highlighted diverse motivations for learning Indigenous languages, often linking it to their personal identities, cultural connection, and career paths. The importance of immersion programs was emphasized, during childhood and as adults, to experience intergenerational transmission of language and culture. Panelists noted that being less surrounded by the language can make learning challenging, but practical, hands-on activities, such as radio programming or traditional practices like tanning hides, help make the language feel alive and immersive.

Working directly with first-language speakers was described as an essential factor, as were methods that focus on the roots of words and their meanings. Youth participants expressed the importance of using the language confidently in all areas of life, including literature and science. One-on-one conversations and mentorship were also cited as crucial supports for deeper learning.

Additionally, the vital role of women in preserving and transmitting languages was also discussed, highlighting the significance of matrilineal knowledge. Experiences such as land-based language camps, traditional practices, and university courses were seen as meaningful opportunities to honour cultural heritage, while also strengthening linguistic skills.



UNIQUE LINGUISTIC CONTEXT IN QUEBEC

The objective of the language gatherings hosted by the Commission is to hear directly from Indigenous Peoples and communities about their language revitalization needs, which includes understanding linguistic dynamics and contexts that are unique to respective regions. Therefore, the gathering in Montreal was an opportunity for the Commission to better understand the regional complexities experienced by English and French speaking First Nations in Quebec.

A presentation by Sarah Cleary from the Regional Committee on First Nations Languages shed light on particularities of the linguistic context in the region. Sarah is a member of the Comité Régional des Langues Ancestrales (CRLA), which represents 43 communities across Labrador and Quebec. The organization's mandate includes mobilizing and informing communities, promoting and defending ancestral languages, and reinforcing linguistic capacity. CRLA's initiatives incorporate Indigenous music into media, including a 5% quota on radio through the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission. Sarah shared that through music and community engagement, CRLA has garnered support from allies across Quebec and Labrador.

The vision of CRLA is anchored in breathing life into ancestral languages, community support, and the inclusion of Indigenous languages in education and healthcare. The Quebec and Labrador region is home to ten First Nations languages with numerous dialects and varying levels of vitality, but Sarah noted limited data as an obstacle and reiterated the urgent need to support teacher education programs.

The presentation highlighted key challenges in the region, including the dominance of two colonial languages, high costs of translation into official languages, as well as disparities in funding due to provincial legislations prioritizing French. While the Indigenous Languages Act provides avenues for language advocacy, it must be strengthened to enable strategic leveraging.

Sarah concluded her presentation by emphasizing that First Nations are best positioned to lead their own language protection and revitalization initiatives, and governments at all levels must address funding disparities and to better support revitalization efforts.



INDIGENOUS LANGUAGES AND ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

Shingai Manjengwa's presentation explored the intersection of artificial intelligence (AI) and Indigenous languages, providing both foundational knowledge and practical applications for policy makers, language champions, and community members. The session began with an inspirational story about traditional fishing methods, illustrating the tension between longstanding cultural practices and new, seemingly more efficient approaches. This analogy was used to encourage participants to reflect on what they are willing to adopt with AI and what cultural values they are not willing to compromise.

The presentation offered a comprehensive explanation of AI models, their everyday applications, and live demonstrations, including an AI chatbot addressing language learning. While AI offers practical benefits, such as assisting with grant applications or employment opportunities, the demonstration highlighted that generative AI could misrepresent Indigenous cultures, oversimplify identities and worldviews, and perpetuate inaccurate or inappropriate portrayals.

Shingai also addressed bias in AI, explaining different types of biases, how to detect them, and strategies for mitigation. Participants asked questions focused on reducing bias in AI applications for Indigenous languages and ensuring data security. To address this, Shingai recommended that Indigenous communities should register their work with official government bodies and use certified AI tools to safeguard cultural integrity and control over their traditional, scientific, and linguistic knowledges.





STRATEGIC PLANNING AND THE FUTURE OF INDIGENOUS LANGUAGES

The final keynote of the gathering, delivered by Dr. Lorna Williams, focused on strategic planning to advance language revitalization work. Dr. Williams spoke about the deep connections between Indigenous languages and cultures to the land, ancestors, and community. She reflected on her own experience, noting how early education often forced teaching in English or French, which adversely impacted Indigenous thinking and languages. This experience highlights the importance of grounding strategic planning in Indigenous worldviews rather than Western models, which tend to separate people from foundational relationships. She stressed that language revitalization cannot be considered in isolation, as it is intricately linked to all aspects of life and community.

Dr. Williams highlighted the challenges posed by formal education systems, post-secondary institutions, and government structures, which often require Indigenous language teachers to acquire English or French training to be certified and compensated. She called for systemic changes to allow Indigenous educators to learn and teach in ways aligned with their own knowledge systems. Additionally, partnerships within communities are crucial, as is identifying where languages are actively used to ensure that revitalization efforts are meaningful and sustainable.

Therefore, frameworks related to strategic planning for our languages must incorporate reflections to the following questions:

- Where do we want to go?
- Why do we want to go there?
- What is the terrain and how long will it take to get there?
- Where are we now? What are the stories, songs and signs?
- Who will we meet on our way and how will they be involved?
- How will we know when we get there?

Dr. Williams also noted the importance of incorporating Indigenous values into organizations and programs, starting initiatives with ceremony and prayer, and recognizing the broader relevance of Indigenous knowledges to global issues, including environmental stewardship and harmonious living. She concluded that strategic planning must honour cultural connections, ensure community-driven approaches, and support the ongoing transmission of language for future generations.

THE WAY FORWARD: GROUNDING OURSELVES IN OUR LANGUAGES AND CREATION STORIES

The gathering in Kanien'kehá:ka territory concluded with remarks by Director Joan Greyeyes and Director Robert Watt, both of whom reflected on the importance of youth learning and speaking their languages, as well as having opportunities to expand their worldviews.

The Commission's language gathering in Montreal reflects its ongoing commitment to place Indigenous Peoples and communities at the heart of language revitalization and preservation efforts. Insights shared by participants in Montreal and future gatherings will be the driving force in creating new pathways forward. Through these gatherings, the Commission will continue to amplify the voices of Indigenous Peoples and support language champions leading the movement to celebrate, protect and strengthen their languages.





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