

Considering the Triple Bottom Line of Good Governance

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Bolivia's President Evo Morales, center, waves as he is escorted by a group of men during an indigenous religious ceremony that recognizes Morales as the country's leader in Tiwanaku, Bolivia. (AP Photo/Dado Ruvic)

Governments around the world are gradually recognizing and acknowledging that historical and existing models of government relations with Indigenous peoples have not worked and that new approaches are urgently needed. Good governance, almost everyone agrees, is the absolute foundation of locally controlled and effective social, economic, political and cultural development. Standard Western models of government, typically judged by financial metrics and bottom-line accounting procedures, do not fit well with Indigenous needs and aspirations. New approaches, tied to broader evaluations of effectiveness and built off of “triple bottom line” thinking, are urgently needed if there is to be genuine improvement and meaningful power sharing with Indigenous peoples.

The realization of the importance of innovative, culturally-sensitive approaches is not new. Franz Fanon, the Algerian psychologist and intellectual leader of the decolonization movements of the 1960s and 1970s, wrote in 1963:

the healing and re-development of the 'fourth world' must not be modeled on the existing models re: cultural, economic and social development. Social policies and governmental structures need to be developed which do not mimic the existing models which have been founded on subjugation, assimilation, and colonial practices of land and resource appropriation. (p. 83).

Indigenous peoples are contributing to the global development of policies and services rather than simply acquiescing to other people's vision and mandates. Indigenous scholars have identified that Indigenous leadership and Indigenous spaces, or 'zones of refuge,' are critical in redressing historical harms and advancing the re-development of the Fourth World.

Settler populations, however, also have a responsibility to promote historical redress, reparation and reconciliation. As stated by the Canadian Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (1996) addressing the harms of the past and the social and political structures that currently sustain them should not be left to Aboriginal people. The report observed: "Just as social problems spring in part from collective experience, so solutions require change at the collective level. Aboriginal people acting alone cannot shift the weight of disadvantage and discrimination" (RCAP, 1996).

Political engagement and sound social policy, developed in collaboration with the populations they affect, are potentially powerful pathways to addressing long standing issues of social injustice in regards to Aboriginal Peoples. Integral to articles #18 and #19 of the United Nations International Declaration of Indigenous Rights (UNDRIP) are the principles of participation and consent in decisions affecting Indigenous populations.

18. 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

19. 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.

Members of Settler populations, acting in collaboration with Indigenous people and organizations, can hold governments responsible. It is vital that commitments to Indigenous governance and general administrative forums, especially in these global economic times, are not preoccupied with fiscal restraint but rather attend to social, cultural and environmental issues. The business phrase, “the triple bottom line” describes a new way of evaluating the success of businesses not solely on the basis of profit. The triple bottom line monitors social, environmental, and economic performance of the corporation over a period of time. This approach to measurement could in turn be applied to assessing good governance in which leaders, Indigenous and non-Indigenous, would be judged by the social, cultural and environmental impacts of their policies and not just to standard efficiencies measures. At this critical juncture in Indigenous and Settler relations, at this time of public apologies in Canada and Australia and the global acceptance of such international frameworks as UNDRIP, there is an opportunity to monitor and advance social policies which seek to respect the rights and provide redress for historical injustices for Indigenous peoples in Canada and around the world.

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