

PRACTICE BRIEF

April 2023

Photo: Mauna a Wākea with host Mauna Kea Education and Awareness

A GLOBAL INDIGENOUS COLLABORATIVE TO RESTORE BALANCE FOR THE WELLBEING OF HUMANITY AND THE ENVIRONMENT

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SUMMARY

The impact of climate change and ecosystem collapse can no longer be ignored. We have reached a critical moment, a tipping point that calls for informed and effective climate action. “Engaging Indigenous communities” as suggested by the United Nations, national governments, researchers, and others is not enough. Indigenous-led systems transformation is needed to inform legal, regulatory, policy, and practical approaches to ensure an abundant future. Now is the time to deconstruct the systems and practices that reinforce colonialism and perpetuate inequities.

In 2021, Red Star International, Inc. (Red Star), an Indigenous-led non-profit organization based in the U.S., explored the potential role a global, multi-sector Indigenous collaborative could have in advancing systems transformation for the well-being of humanity and the environment. This practice brief summarizes the participatory process utilized and Red Star’s future directions based on project outcomes.

INTRODUCTION

Indigenous identities and knowledge systems, in all their diversity, are intricately woven within and across our ancestral lands and waters. They are the means upon which our cultural, physical, and spiritual survival depends. Now, more than ever, these interconnected social and ecological systems are being disrupted by a changing climate. Researchers exploring the connection between Indigenous knowledge systems and climate change over the last decade, and more recently the United Nations 2019 Global Assessment Report on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services, have cited the importance of inclusive governance approaches that engage Indigenous peoples and local communities to ensure equity and participation.¹⁻³ A major limitation to ‘inclusive approaches that engage’ is that they often perpetuate the power differentials that negatively impact social and cultural determinants of Indigenous wellbeing.

“When we speak all together, we are more powerful. Future generations will benefit.”

- Participant Quote

1 Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES). (2019). [The global assessment report on biodiversity and ecosystem services of the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services](#). ISBN No: 978-3-9478513-3.

2 Ford, James D. (2012) [Indigenous Health and Climate Change](#). *American Journal of Public Health*, 102: 1260-1266.

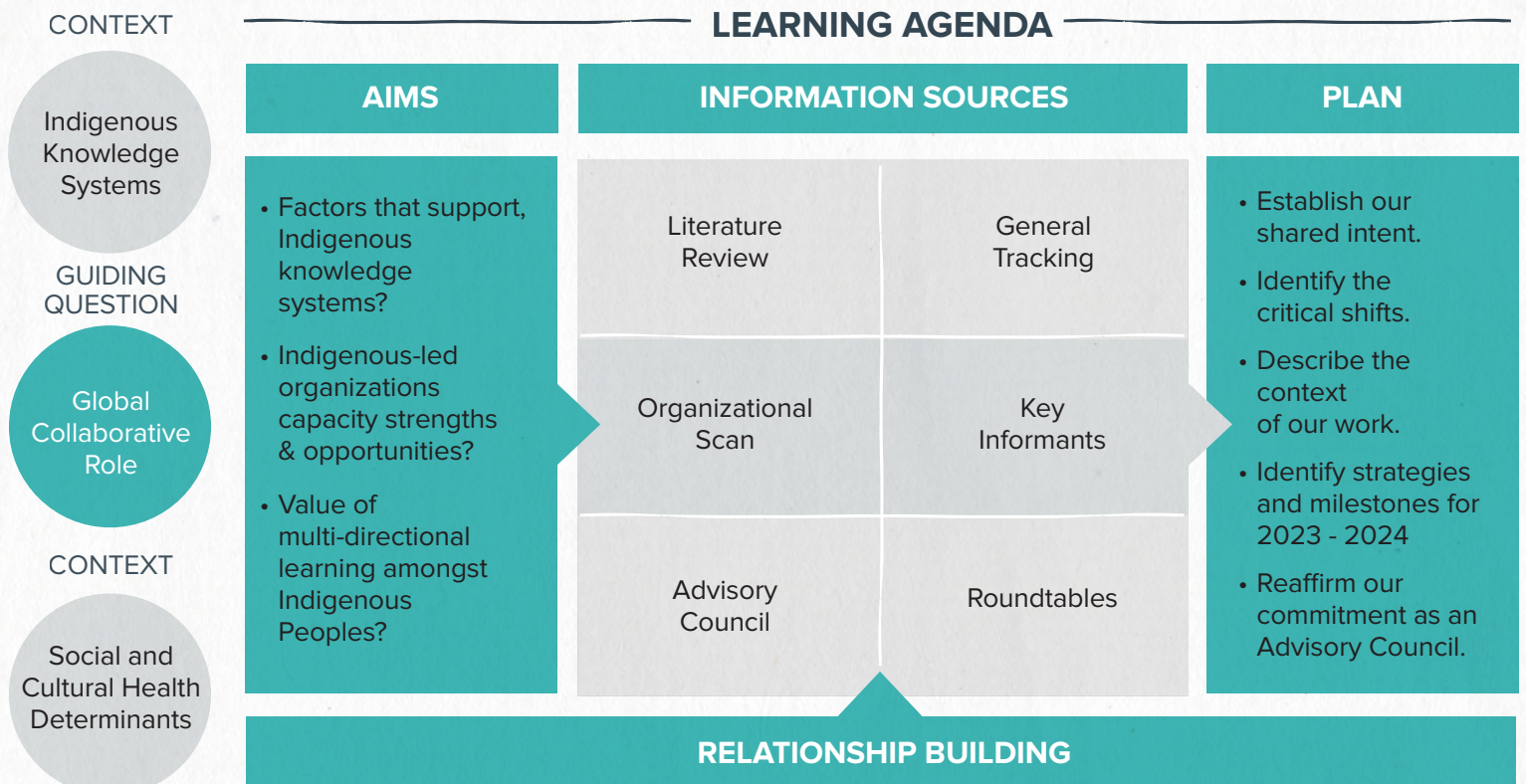
3 Jones, Rhys. (2019) [Climate change and Indigenous Health Promotion](#). *Global Health Promotion*, 26 (3_suppl): 73-81.

Indigenous peoples’ relational approaches are essential to reestablish the connections needed to restore balance and our relationship with the natural world. Colonial mindsets continue to be centered on resource-taking and fail to recognize the science within Indigenous knowledge systems and practices. Rather than ‘inclusive processes’ that merely engage Indigenous peoples, we need to eliminate the institutional barriers to Indigenous-led governance, management practices and decision-making. We need to work together to reconcile divergent values in order to transform the systems – policies, laws, processes and interactions – that are negatively impacting the health of humanity and the natural environment.

A Shared Learning Agenda

In 2021, Red Star launched an 18-month exploration into the potential role a **global, multi-sector Indigenous collaborative** could have in addressing climate change as a worldwide health challenge. This exploration, entitled *Restoring Balance for the Wellbeing of Humanity and the Environment (Restoring Balance)*, utilized a participatory approach process to facilitate shared learning and decision making by exploring questions with others. This process is often referred to as a learning agenda. Red Star began by convening an global advisory council of indigenous leaders representing diverse perspectives, educational backgrounds, experience, and expertise. Together, we explored the following questions within the context of Indigenous knowledge systems, including our connection with the land and all living things as determinant of health and well-being:

- What factors support, enable, and reinforce Indigenous knowledge systems globally?
- What opportunities are there to support current capacity strengths internationally?
- Is there value in multidirectional learning among Indigenous peoples globally?
- How could a global, multi-sector, Indigenous collaborative support current efforts?



The approach to the *Restoring Balance Learning Agenda* included relationship building activities with Indigenous leadership, communities, and organizations across multiple sectors (e.g. law, policy, education, health, and natural resource management). Our partners at Seven Directions, A Public Health Institute at the University of Washington (Seven Directions) conducted a scoping literature review to gain an understanding of published theories, concepts, and frameworks exploring the connection between climate and the natural environment as social and cultural determinants of Indigenous health. Seven Directions also conducted an internet search of Indigenous environmental organizations within the identified global geography to identify potential partnerships and alliances, and to gather insight on how a global collaborative could augment existing efforts. Red Star hosted virtual roundtables and held one-to-one conversations with Indigenous leaders to discuss the value of coming together as a global collaborative, explore opportunities to align, and identify critical shifts that could be addressed by the collaborative.

Due to similar colonial experiences, treaty relations, common language, and health care delivery systems, we focused our initial learning on the United States, Canada, Australia, and Polynesia. There are plans to expand to other regions of the world in the future.

Indigenous-led Systems Transformation to Restore Balance

Outcomes from the Restoring Balance Learning Agenda reaffirmed what we already know – colonialism is negatively impacting our collective well-being and the well-being of the natural environment. Climate change is disrupting Indigenous well-being disproportionately due to the interconnection of our traditional knowledge systems and practices with ecological systems. Systemic and institutional barriers severely limit Indigenous peoples' ability to sustain and transmit traditional knowledge and practices. Barriers include limited access to traditional territories, restrictive policies, programs, and limited funding mechanisms to address the unique conditions faced by Indigenous communities. Other challenges lie at the interface with non-Indigenous governments and Western trained scientists, policy makers, and conservation groups.⁵⁻⁸ Failure to recognize and uphold sovereign rights of Indigenous communities, lack of collaboration from national policymakers and conservation organizations, and dismissiveness of Western trained scientists often permeate these interactions.

“Indigenous communities have been facing on-going threats as a result of colonization and capitalism for generations.”

- Participant Quote

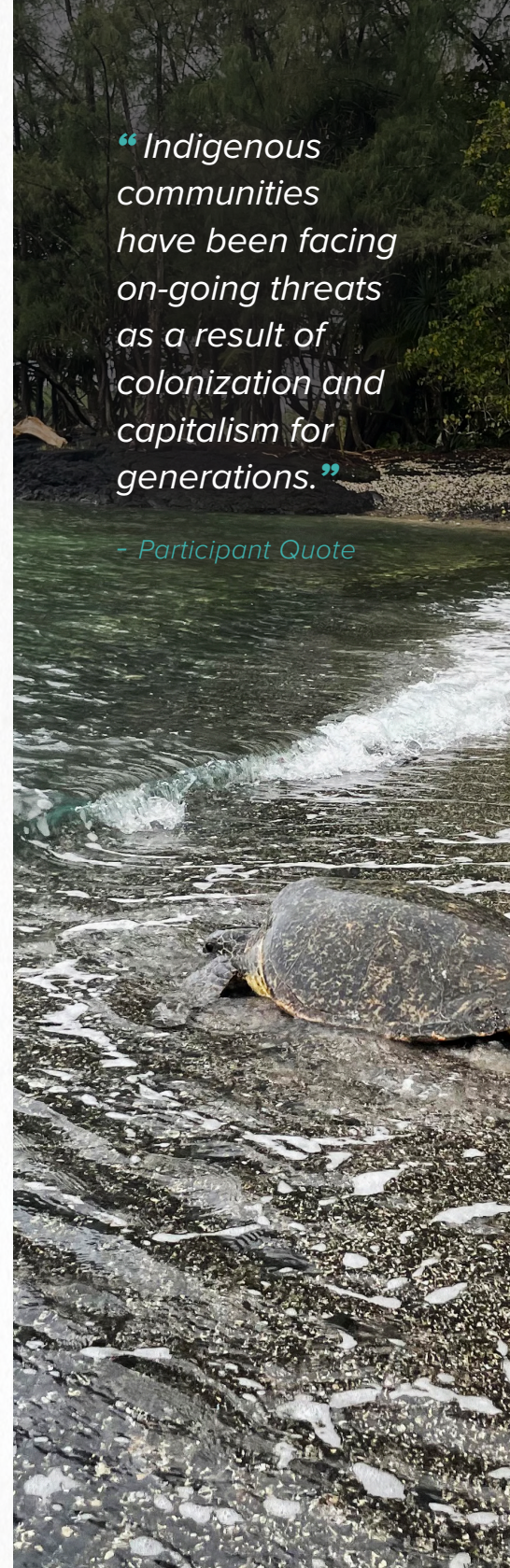


Photo: Laehala, Hilo, Hawai'i

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- 5 McKemey, M., Ens, E., Rangers, Y. M., Costello, O., & Reid, N. (2020). Indigenous Knowledge and Seasonal Calendar Inform Adaptive Savanna Burning in Northern Australia. *Sustainability*, 12(3), 995. doi:10.3390/su12030995
- 6 Rusack, E. M., Dortch, J., Hayward, K., Renton, M., Boer, M., & Grierson, P. (2011). The Role of Habitus in the Maintenance of Traditional Noongar Plant Knowledge in Southwest Western Australia. *Human Ecology*, 39(5), 673-682. doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/s10745-011-9420-0>
- 7 Baldy, Cutcha Risling. (2013). Why we gather: Traditional gathering in native Northwest California and the future of bio-cultural sovereignty. *Ecological Processes*, 2(1), 1-10.
- 8 Cost, D. S. (2015). [The role of public education in governance for resilience in a rapidly changing arctic](#). *Ecology and Society*, 20(3), 1.

Restoring balance for the well-being of humanity and the environment requires recognition and support of Indigenous self-determination and knowledge systems as foundational elements to both climate and health solutions.⁹ Such a process requires us to build our collective futures from within our traditional cultures, and by exercising our authority based on our own values, norms, and lived experiences.¹⁰

A Global Multi-Sector Collaborative

A global collaborative could connect, expand, and strengthen local, regional, and national networks by creating a space for idea exchange, advancing Indigenous-led efforts to meaningfully address community health and critical responses to ecosystems under threat. Participants acknowledged Indigenous peoples are leading system change within their own communities and there is great value in coming together as a global community of practice. Communities of practice are innately Indigenous and provide a conducive forum for learning and sharing their knowledge and experience. Therefore, the initial purpose of the Restoring Balance Collaborative is to convene a global multi-sector community of practice to uplift local Indigenous-led systems transformation for the wellbeing of humanity and the environment. Red Star will serve as the backbone organization – the coordinating body that brings together a diversity of stakeholders – to the collaborative and lead a synchronized effort to achieve a common goal. Based on project outcomes, the collaborative’s focus for the next 18 months is to facilitate the following:

“We know the value of a local collaborative. A global collaborative could elevate and support our local efforts, while building confidence that we are on the right path.”

- Participant Quote



KNOWLEDGE SHARING

Gather to advance Indigenous agency.

Coming together to share, learn, and strategize strengthens our Indigenous communities locally for global impact. Even though our local context might be different, Indigenous people often have a shared understanding, value system, and world view. Conversations centered on exploring ideas take our conversations to the next level and lead to cultural innovation. Our communities are faced with similar challenges and we can draw strength from one another. Sharing diverse knowledge systems generates deeper understanding of the issues, broadens the array of solutions, and supports decision-making at multiple levels.¹¹ The *Restoring Balance Collaborative* will provide a shared space, or ‘hub’, for people with a common context to communicate and share information, history, stories, and personal experiences in a way that builds understanding and insight.

Strategy: Convene an Indigenous-led space for learning, sharing & strategizing

- Connect people who might not otherwise have the opportunity to interact.
- Introduce collaborative processes to encourage the free flow of ideas and exchange.
- Create collaborative partnerships to address shared aspirations.
- Leverage resources, training, and materials to take the work to the next level.

Photo: Hairini Marae, Tauranga Moana, Aotearoa/New Zealand

9 Jones, Rhys. (2019) [Climate change and Indigenous Health Promotion](#). *Global Health Promotion*, 26 (3_suppl): 73-81.

10 Tsosie R, Coffey W. (2001) Rethinking the tribal sovereignty doctrine: Cultural sovereignty and the collective future of Indian nations. *Stanford Law Policy Review*, 12(2):191-222.

11 Henri, D. A., Martinez-Levasseur, L. M., Weetaltuk, S., Mallory, M. L., Gilchrist, H. G., & Jean-Gagnon, F. (2020). Inuit knowledge of Arctic Terns (*Sterna paradisaea*) and perspectives on declining abundance in southeastern Hudson Bay, Canada. *PLoS One*, 15(11), e0242193. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0242193>



Photo: Laehala, Hilo, Hawaii

MULTIDIRECTIONAL LEARNING

Indigenous-led Spaces to explore new pathways.

Spaces are needed where Indigenous people can align around specific issues and harness political power in step with sovereignty, treaty rights, and Indigenous knowledge systems. Growing investments by the United Nations and member countries have led to rapid increases in awareness, resources, and investment in fostering inclusivity of Indigenous knowledge systems as they relate to climate change. Convening Indigenous-led knowledge exchange and collaboration can shift power dynamics and facilitate opportunities to create ethical space for engagement with the non-Indigenous within an Indigenous context, worldview, and values. Ethical space allows for authentic intercultural dialogue and exchange, opening doors to learning, reconciliation, and indigenization of sustainable development.¹²

Strategy: Facilitate multi-directional learning to reconcile worldviews.

- Support innovative approaches to address health and environmental vulnerabilities.
- Convene virtual gatherings to discuss and explore strategic topics.
- Enable dialogue to explore possibilities and solve challenging problems.



Photo: A Meeting of Sacred Waters at the Heard Museum in Phoenix, AZ. Photo by Joel Angel Juarez, The Republic

GLOBAL REPRESENTATION

Global connections to support local work.

Indigenous voices need to be amplified in order to overcome systemic and institutional barriers and restrictive policies, programs, and differential investments that are negatively impacting our collective health and the environment. *The Restoring Balance Collaborative* will actively seek opportunities to amplify and normalize Indigenous voices, worldview and perspectives at the intersection of health, the environment, and climate. A comprehensive communications strategy will be developed to bring global attention to Indigenous-led approaches to natural resource stewardship, protection, and management.

Strategy:

Provide a global platform to highlight local Indigenous-led systems change.

- Utilize multi-media to create awareness and increase representation of Indigenous perspectives on health equity and climate.
- Convene global gatherings highlighting Indigenous agency and impactful practices.
- Reinforce Indigenous worldviews and values, focusing on generational impact.

¹² Crowshoe, R. & Lertzman, D. (2020) Invitation to ethical space: A dialogue on sustainability and reconciliation. In R. Colbourne & R. Anderson's Indigenous wellbeing and enterprise: self-determination and sustainable economic development (pp 10-44). Taylor & Francis Group. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429329029>

RESTORING BALANCE: THE NEXT PHASE

While knowledge sharing is valuable, it also brings with it responsibility. The importance of protecting Indigenous knowledge systems also emerged as an important theme. As the collaborative develops, protocols will be formalized to avoid compromising our knowledge base by consciously choosing what and how much is shared. Guiding principles such as respect for sovereignty, local knowledge, relational accountability, and reciprocity are essential to ensuring the protocols in place protect knowledge and avoid misappropriation and the harm of misuse. For these reasons, sharing across nations requires trust and cultural integrity.

Successful collaboratives often start small by connecting people who might not otherwise have the opportunity to interact. In the next phase, Red Star will focus on growing the *Restoring Balance Global Collaborative* to connect, expand, and strengthen local, regional, and national networks to advance Indigenous-led efforts to meaningfully address community health and ecosystems under threat. Red Star will seek to mobilize the Collaborative to identify best practices and seek opportunities to amplify Indigenous-led perspectives on critical issues, such as natural resource stewardship and biodiversity. Growing our global community will ensure broad-based perspectives on issues with global impact, while tethering to policy change in the U.S. and abroad.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We are grateful to the many Indigenous leaders who participated, shared, and celebrated in Restoring Balance activities. Their contributions and insights provided great learning, steering us in the right direction to keep us on course.



Photo: Advisory Councilmembers with our host, Huliauapa'a, Inc., at 'Imiloa Astronomy Center in Hilo, Hawaii'.

Advisory Council (listed alphabetically)

- Julia Bernal, (Pueblo/Yuchi-Creek), Executive Director, Pueblo Action Alliance, U.S.
- Turama Hawira, Te Pou Tupua (face and voice of the Whanganui River) New Zealand
- Judith LeBlanc (Caddo) Executive Director, Native Organizers Alliance, U.S.
- Ken Paul (Wolastoqey) Lead Fisheries Negotiator and Fisheries Research Coordinator, Wolastoqey Nation, Canada
- Keria Ponga, Te Pou Tupua (face and voice of the Whanganui River) New Zealand
- Kelley Lehuakeapuna Uyeoka (Kanaka Maoli) Executive Director, Huliauapa'a, Hawai'i

Red Star International Team: Aleena M. Kawe, MPH, President & Chief Executive Officer, and Kris Rhodes, MPH, Asemaake LLC and Theresa M. Cariño, MEd who served as contributors and co-facilitators on the project.

We would like to also acknowledge our partners on this grant, Dr. Myra Parker, JD, MPH, Dr. Maya Magarati, and Carly Marshall, MPA at Seven Directions.

Support for this practice brief was provided by a grant from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation.