

Final Report

Mobilizing the Indigenous Housing and Homelands Governance Toolkit



Prepared for

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CMHC

Prepared by

Indigenous Homelands Program
Ecotrust Canada



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Executive Summary

Launching an accessible toolkit that offers alternative approaches to housing policies for Indigenous communities

Our key goals of this project were to a) Create opportunities for First Nations to be involved in fair and cooperative housing discussions with governments, public agencies, and financial institutions; b) In collaboration with First Nations partners, identify new and culturally appropriate systems of land renting and ownership (tenure); and c) Make the Housing & Homelands Governance Toolkit easily accessible online with a digital marketing strategy that promotes resources with and for First Nations.

As part of this project's activities, we successfully launched the Indigenous Housing & Homelands Governance Toolkit, an open-access readily available toolkit designed to support First Nations in understanding what possibilities exist for culturally legitimate housing and lands governance, particularly within the context of Aboriginal title lands, modern treaty lands, and other emerging jurisdictions in British Columbia. The modules presented within the toolkit seek to explore ideas that are 'outside the box' of the colonial Indigenous housing system. Underlying this work is the assumption that Indigenous values, principles, jurisdiction, and legal orders can form the foundation for innovative mechanisms for lands and housing developments. To see the toolkit, visit: homelandstoolkit.ca

Over the past year, we shared the toolkit with First Nations, funders, and financial institutions across Canada, and worked with partnering Nations on several community action projects, based on outcomes from the toolkit modules.



Résumé

Lancement d'une boîte à outils accessible qui propose des approches alternatives aux politiques de logement pour les communautés autochtones.

Les principaux objectifs de ce projet étaient les suivants : a) créer des opportunités pour les Premières Nations de participer à des discussions équitables et coopératives sur le logement avec les gouvernements, les agences publiques et les institutions financières ; b) en collaboration avec les partenaires des Premières Nations, identifier des systèmes nouveaux et culturellement appropriés de location et de propriété des terres; et c) rendre la boîte à outils sur la gouvernance du logement et des terres d'origine facilement accessible en ligne grâce à une stratégie de marketing numérique qui promeut les ressources avec et pour les Premières Nations.

Dans le cadre des activités de ce projet, nous avons lancé avec succès la trousse à outils sur la gouvernance du logement et des terres autochtones, une trousse à outils en libre accès et facilement disponible, conçue pour aider les Premières Nations à comprendre les possibilités qui existent en matière de gouvernance culturellement légitime du logement et des terres, en particulier dans le contexte des terres visées par un titre autochtone, des terres visées par un traité moderne et d'autres juridictions émergentes en Colombie-Britannique. Les modules présentés dans la boîte à outils cherchent à explorer des idées qui sortent des sentiers battus du système colonial de logement autochtone. Ce travail repose sur l'hypothèse que les valeurs, les principes, les compétences et les ordres juridiques autochtones peuvent constituer le fondement de mécanismes novateurs pour les terres et les projets de logement. Pour consulter la boîte à outils, visitez : homelandstoolkit.ca.

Au cours de l'année écoulée, nous avons partagé la boîte à outils avec les Premières Nations, les bailleurs de fonds et les institutions financières à travers le Canada, et nous avons travaillé avec les nations partenaires sur plusieurs projets d'action communautaire, basés sur les résultats des modules de la boîte à outils.



Acknowledgements

This research was led by the Indigenous Homelands Program of Ecotrust Canada, and received funding from Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC) under the National Housing Strategy (NHS). The views, analysis, interpretations, and recommendations expressed in this research are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of CMHC. CMHC's financial contribution to this report does not constitute an endorsement of its contents. We would also like to acknowledge the financial support of the McConnell Foundation, who contributed significantly to this project.

Our community partners are the backbone of this project. Without the trust, investment, time, wisdom, expertise, and generosity of our partners, this work would not be possible. We would like to specifically acknowledge the Nuxalk Nation, Xeni Gwet'in Nation, and Tsilqhot'in National Government, on whose unceded, ancestral, and traditional territory much of this work took place, either in preparation for or during this project. We would like to specifically express gratitude to Nuxalk Nation's elected Chief Sam Schooner, and department heads Carrigan Tallio (Economic Development), Timothy Hans (Lands & Assets), and Courtney Elliott (Housing), who were instrumental in supporting our Toolkit Tour and community workshops.

Ecotrust Canada's core team members who worked on this project were Ashli Akins and Kia Dunn of the Indigenous Homelands Program, with support from many other staff members and programs. Photos used in this report were taken in Nuxalk territory by Shannon Lough and Kia Dunn. The report was written by Ashli Akins and Kia Dunn.



Introduction

This project, “Mobilizing the Indigenous Housing and Homelands Governance Toolkit,” was led by the Indigenous Homelands Program of Ecotrust Canada, with financial support from the Canadian Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC) and the McConnell Foundation, as well as financial and in-kind support by the Nuxalk Nation.

About the Lead Applicant

The Indigenous Homelands Program of Ecotrust Canada is the Lead Applicant of this project. Ecotrust Canada is an enterprising non-profit that works with rural, remote, and Indigenous communities toward building an economy that provides for a healthy and resilient natural environment; sustainable and abundant energy, food, and housing; prosperous and meaningful livelihoods; and vibrant cultures and inclusive societies. We call this approach “building an economy that provides for life.”

The Indigenous Homelands Program focuses on a holistic approach to well-being. It aims to break down barriers that prevent community members from being able to return to, and thrive in, their homelands. It is committed to Indigenous self-determination, and is an innovative platform for change that mobilizes local skills, expertise, Indigenous knowledge systems, and territorial assets to create vibrant, healthy housing ecosystems.

About the Project

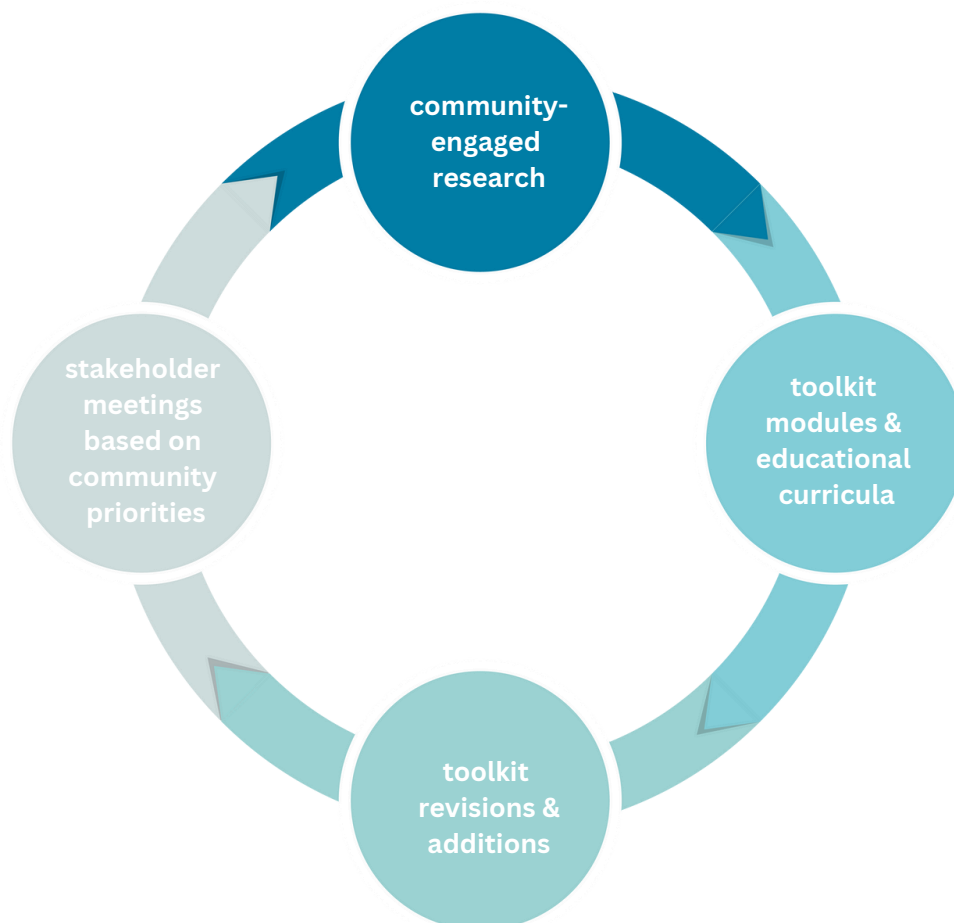
The Indigenous Housing and Homelands Governance Toolkit was developed by the Indigenous Homelands Program in collaboration with several First Nations partners over the course of 2021 and 2022 (www.homelandstoolkit.ca). The toolkit is a series of interconnected modules exploring alternative ‘outside of the colonial box’ approaches to Indigenous housing governance.

Through this project, we sought to implement and expand the toolkit by working directly with First Nations partners. This included carrying out workshops, yielding research outcomes, and communicating findings in ways that remain accessible and replicable. The Indigenous Housing and Homelands Governance toolkit aims to address an information and capacity deficit, playing an important role in removing systemic barriers that prevent First Nations people from accessing sustainable and culturally relevant housing. Likewise, the toolkit stands to create much needed opportunities for First Nations to engage on housing issues with governments, public agencies, and financial institutions in a way that is reciprocal, just, and equitable.

Methodology

Our methodology is participatory, iterative, and cyclical. Our community-engaged research is what inspires iterations of the Indigenous Housing & Homelands Governance Toolkit, which then leads to community workshops and engagement sessions. During these sessions we receive valuable feedback on the toolkit and its related curricula, which then leads to adaptations, continued growth, and further iterations. Further community-engaged research often stems from this new toolkit research.

Through this iterative approach, our goal is to close the gap in communication and education, and to facilitate knowledge-sharing, between the different demographics.





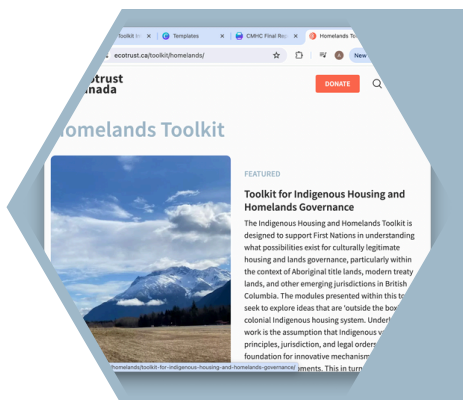
COMMUNITY-ENGAGED RESEARCH

We work in collaboration with our community partners on innovative research related to holistic solutions for Indigenous housing. Based on the lessons learned from community-engaged research, we then adapt (non-confidential) aspects of this work into applicable knowledge-sharing opportunities for other communities, by developing toolkit modules.



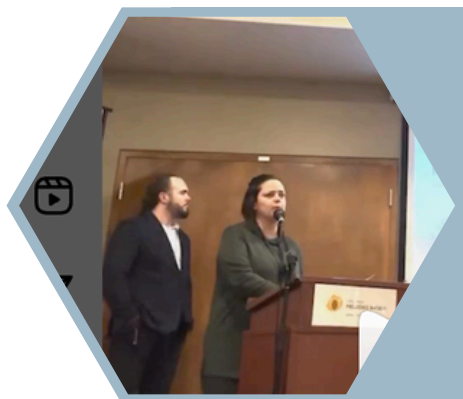
COMMUNITY WORKSHOPS

Democratizing knowledge related to housing and homelands rights is a key value of this project. Therefore, key aspects of these toolkit modules are then turned into engagement tools for Chief & Council and community members, through interactive workshops and presentations.



TOOLKIT REVISIONS

During these workshops, presentations, and community work, we receive valuable feedback about our toolkit modules, as well as requests for new research and modules based on key priorities for partnering communities. We then adapt the toolkit modules according to this feedback, and expand the toolkit with new modules and workshops based on community needs, priorities, and feedback.



STAKEHOLDER MEETINGS

Finally, disseminating findings (including community priorities) to key players in the Indigenous housing sector is a critical piece of the puzzle to being a catalyst for change. We aimed to accomplish this through stakeholder meetings, presentations, and workshops with key decision-makers and funders across Canada.

Main activities

NEW WORKING MODEL

We changed our Indigenous Homelands Program's working model, to expand our mission beyond housing, ensure that our activities are meeting the urgent needs of our partnering communities, and align our activities with our values in a more holistic and interdisciplinary way. To learn more about our new working model, read our new Director's blog [here](#) or watch this video [here](#).

GATHERING FEEDBACK ABOUT TOOLKIT

We spent the first part of this granting period working with our partners to invite feedback on our Housing & Homelands Governance Toolkit, in order to adapt and improve it, and to set up strategies for both digital and in-person mobilization.

CONNECTING WITH FINANCIAL INSTITUTIONS

We made new connections with financial institutions, in particular the Aboriginal Savings Corporation of Canada (ABSCAN), the National Aboriginal Capital Corporations Association (NACCA), and VanCity. This included promoting the toolkit at a Special NACCA Working Session on the Yänonhchia' initiative, that was held in Wendake, Quebec, with representatives from over 40 national Indigenous financial institutions. Additionally, we presented the toolkit and its initial findings to VanCity, with a focus on the financial module.

DEVELOPED NEW WORKSHOPS BASED ON TOOLKIT MODULES

We developed templates for workshops focusing on our Values & Principles module, and Rights & Responsibilities of home ownership and tenancy, which include presentations, workbooks, and facilitation notes.

FACILITATED COMMUNITY HOUSING WORKSHOP FOR NUXALK

We facilitated a community-wide in-person event with 64 members of the Nuxalk Nation in Bella Coola, on priorities, values, and principles related to housing. Alongside the presentation about the toolkit and workshop facilitation, which stimulated great dialogue throughout, there were housing-related raffle prizes and home-cooked food.

MET WITH DEPARTMENT HEADS OF TNG & NUXALK

We met with several department heads of the Tsilhqot'in National Government and Nuxalk Nation (specifically from the Housing Department, Economic Development Department, and Lands) to discuss their priorities and needs related to housing and homelands, and share how the toolkit and our holistic community work may be able to support their work. In addition to having in-person working sessions and meetings, we also had the opportunity to visit key sites with Nuxalk leaders that are important to housing.

GOVERNANCE

We held two Governance Policy sessions with Nuxalk Nation's Chief & Council, both of which were very generative, with a lot of great dialogue and ideas regarding the policy, governance, and how we can further support the Nation. The non-confidential aspects of this work may serve as a future module for the toolkit.

LAND TENURE RESEARCH

We concluded our research with Xeni Gwet'in Nation, with respect to innovations in land tenure. This research focused on developing culturally distinct and appropriate forms of relationship with land, providing options beyond fee-simple or other established legal forms, which can be deployed in their context of declared Aboriginal Title. We are documenting the non-confidential aspects of this work as a case study, to serve as a future module for the toolkit.

Results & Impact of the Project

Our key goals of this project were to a) create opportunities for First Nations to be involved in fair and cooperative housing discussions with governments, public agencies, and financial institutions; b) in collaboration with First Nations partners, identify new and culturally appropriate systems of land renting and ownership (tenure); and c) make the toolkit easily accessible online with a digital marketing strategy that promotes the resources with First Nations.

Some of the results and impacts of the project include:

- **Gwich'in First Nation using our Module:** One of our biggest goals with the Indigenous Housing & Homelands Governance Toolkit is that communities will find use for it across Canada, without us directly pointing them to it. This is democratization of knowledge at its best – community members finding pieces of information that seem useful to them, adapting it to their situation, and applying it in their own way. One example of this is in the Northwest Territories, where the Gwich'in First Nation is now using our toolkit module on Community Land Trusts to support their governance work. We can't wait to learn about what they end up doing.
- **Nuxalk Nation Case Study:** We have continued developing a new relationship with the Nuxalk Nation and began work on a long-term holistic housing strategy, based on cultural and climatic needs (grown out of our 2022 Housing Ecosystem Overview). This housing strategy will be community-led, and will use toolkit modules to support community members in learning about various steps of the housing governance process. We are documenting the non-confidential aspects of this work as a case study, to serve as a future module for the toolkit. Additionally, we are in the final stages of writing the Nuxalk Governance Policy and have signed a second contract to support both Chief & Council as well as Department Heads to effectively implement, train staff, and communicate about this new policy. The Governance Policy has been an important step in supporting the Nation with some of its main barriers to implementing new housing projects (barriers such as effective governance, organization, communication, and values alignment) so we hope that the policy's implementation will act as a catalyst for interdepartmental community-led programming that is both practical for short-term needs and relevant for long-term visions.

Results & Impact of the Project, cont'd...

- **Redefinition of “Housing”:** We hope that, with this project, we are shifting the definition of “housing” to one that is more holistic and that not only includes the physical infrastructure, but also the spiritual, cultural, environmental, emotional, and mental dimensions that make a house a “home.” In doing so, we see “home” as part of the wellness paradigm and believe that it should not be siloed within the Housing Department, but instead included as part of wrap-around programming in departments such as health, wellness, and education (for example, people suffering from substance abuse not only need placement in a transition house but also require supportive holistic wellness programming). Excluding wrap-around services in the definition of housing has led to infrastructure that is underutilized or reallocated, while populations who need it most are often left without homes. This paradigm shift could have a ripple effect on how housing is seen on-reserve and in communities, as fiscal support will no longer be seen as a “project” that ends, but a “process” that is systemic.
- **Xeni Gwet’in Case Study:** We have continued our work with Xeni Gwet’in, with respect to innovations in land tenure. This research focuses on developing culturally distinct and appropriate forms of relationship with land, providing options beyond fee-simple or other established legal forms, which can be deployed in their context of declared Aboriginal Title. The potential of recognizing legal personhood in land with First Nations standing as legal guardians has emerged as a leading solution. We are documenting the non-confidential aspects of this work as a case study, to serve as a future module for the toolkit.

Lessons Learned

on Product

The development and implementation of the Indigenous Housing & Homelands Governance Toolkit reinforced our foundational axiom that housing cannot be effectively addressed solely as an infrastructural concern but a holistic ecosystem encompassing cultural, social, and environmental dimensions. Elements of life from employment and education to family and well-being are inextricably linked in pursuing housing. Refining our understanding of housing in this way has allowed us to develop a more comprehensive approach that addresses the interconnected needs of communities.

Additionally, the utility of open-access knowledge emerged as a critical factor in democratizing information, ensuring that valuable insights and resources are freely available to all who need them. This accessibility has already begun to prove crucial in supporting Indigenous communities as they build the physical and social infrastructure necessary for self-governance.

Throughout this work we also continue to see the potential of Indigenous solidarity. Sharing knowledge, stories, and lessons learned can foster a sense of community and mutual support. The toolkit has the potential to bring communities together toward a common purpose and enhance these connections, and we recognize there is much more for us to do in facilitating this. We see a potential second phase of partnership with communities as their internal capacity develops and the resulting autonomy reduces the need for external organizations, our role could evolve into that of a facilitator, maintaining a repository - if deemed useful - of who holds specific information and helping to connect capacity with need. By doing so, we can ensure that the toolkit continues to grow and adapt, serving as a dynamic resource that empowers Indigenous communities to share, learn, and build together.

Lessons Learned, cont'd

on Process

Regarding our experience with the grant process itself, we are reminded that relationships must be prioritized over outputs. Effective collaboration with Indigenous communities takes time, and projects cannot always adhere to strict timelines. This reality is further complicated by the often short-term nature of funding and the discrete nature of the deliverables, which are at times insufficient for fostering meaningful long-term change. Reporting structures can often result in redundancies and inefficiencies, diverting valuable time and resources away from impactful work and toward meeting formal requirements. Accountability is necessary, but efficiencies can certainly be found in ensuring the process asks nothing more than what is necessary to ensure funded organizations are having meaningful outcomes.

We have also observed that there can be a disconnect when organizations do not engage directly with the land and the traditional relationships tied to it. This disconnection undermines the work's relevance to the communities it aims to support. The shift from core to project-based funding can exacerbate this issue by increasing reporting demands across multiple smaller funding sources and decreasing funds available to be on the land and in community, further detracting from the focus on substantial, impactful work. A coordinated, centralized, or standardized reporting system utilized by funders broadly could greatly aid funded organizations in prioritizing the projects that they have been funded to complete.

We are similarly actively exploring ways to balance efficiency and impact in our own working relationships, while respecting cultural sensitivities and fostering genuine partnerships with Indigenous communities that are adaptive to their needs. This involves approaching each community with an open mindset, aligning with their structures, and collaboratively developing bespoke solutions that meet their unique needs without imposing predetermined expectations.

Recommendations

for next steps to achieving stated outcomes and anticipated impacts or additional work needed; identification of opportunities or remaining barriers

1. **Digital Campaign:** We are planning a six-month-long digital campaign for 2025, to share the outcomes of this project and disseminate the toolkit on a wider platform.
2. **Democratizing Knowledge Project:** We are beginning a project called “Democratizing Indigenous Housing Knowledge,” with support from the Real Estate Foundation of BC, which is a direct result of this project. This project works to digitize the toolkit through infographics, maps, and short videos. Through this project, we will also create a robust public education curriculum, so that community members across Canada with diverse learning styles can engage in the toolkit modules through a variety of means to learn more about their housing and homelands rights and options.
3. **Facilitation of Indigenous Housing Ecosystem:** A potential second phase of this work could be to support the facilitation of key players and thought leaders across the Indigenous housing sector to discuss potential recommendations and solutions to fill key gaps for a more community-led future of the Indigenous housing ecosystem. We are at the beginning stages of such a project with the McConnell Foundation.
4. **Second Toolkit Tour:** After we have finished our six-month-long digital campaign and our Democratizing Knowledge project in 2025, it would be valuable to launch a second Toolkit Tour with more communities across BC and Canada, sharing our new workshop series and infographics.
5. **Monitoring & Evaluation Framework:** Finally, we would like to develop a survey and monitoring & evaluation framework to continually receive ongoing optional information, statistics, and feedback from people who engage with the toolkit without our direct support, so that we can see how far its reach has been, its impact, and the feedback or improvements that users would like to contribute to the iterative toolkit process.