

# **Indigenous justice for environmental movements:**

## **A tool for aligning environmental work with Indigenous organizing**

*This tool was developed by Catalyst Project with extensive input from Johnella LaRose (Shoshone-Bannock) of the Sogorea Te Land Trust, Mark Tilsen (Oglala-Lakota), Wahleah Johns (Diné) Kim Pate (Cherokee and Choctaw) and multiple other people of the NDN Collective, Gisheekandug Kwe (Anishanaabe) Treaty 1 Territory, Berkley Carnine, and Chanelle Gallant.*

*This is based off of Catalyst Project's [Decolonization Homework](#) that was inspired by the work of Qwul'sih'yah'maht, Robina Thomas (Lyackson of the Coast Salish Nation), and developed with input from Corrina Gould (Chochenyo Ohlone from the Confederated Villages of Lisjan), Johnella LaRose (Shoshone-Bannock), Nick Tilsen (Oglala-Lakota), Annie Morgan Banks and Chanelle Gallant.*

The goal of this tool is for non-Indigenous organizers and organizations doing climate or environmental organizing to align our work with Indigenous organizing and ultimately, with Indigenous sovereignty. Indigenous people here and around the globe have always been hit first and worst by climate and ecological crises. As a result, Indigenous nations have been the frontlines of protecting this land for centuries. They are the longest running, most experienced and most transformative arm of the environmental movement, skilled at working under conditions of repression and imminent collapse. Recognizing this and aligning with Indigenous nations offers environmental organizations the opportunity to align with the power, wisdom, strength and creativity of Indigenous environmental resistance--and win.

Below are a set of questions to research that will help you in this process. While researching, cross reference, look deeper, reach out to people who might know more. Be very wary of resources that tell the story of colonization from a non-Indigenous perspective. Sometimes Indigenous nations have a website and/or an office and can be contacted directly. If you are talking with Indigenous people, ask for consent beforehand, offer a gift of thanks such as tobacco, and think through ways you can reciprocate the time, energy and emotional labor that you are asking from people. We strongly encourage you to build strong, reciprocal relationships with Indigenous people in your area, and depending on the context, asking these questions may or may not be a good way to start or deepen a relationship.

After you do the research please take the time to draw the place that you researched. Include Indigenous nations' territories, Indigenous place names, sacred sites, where Indigenous people are currently organizing, and the streams, creeks or rivers in the watershed. Take the time to let your hands understand what can be hard for our heads to grasp.

## Opening questions

1. Who is/are the Indigenous nation(s) and or tribes that have lived and do live in the areas where you are working? *Note: This might be different, as often times Indigenous people have been forcibly displaced by the US or Canadian government or for other reasons are living on land that is not their traditional homelands.*
2. What Indigenous groups are currently present in that area? This can include tribal governments, traditional leadership, organizations, American Indian Movement (AIM) chapters, Indian Centers, land trusts, organizing groups and more.
3. Do you or people you organize with have relationships with Indigenous communities, organizers or leaders? What work have you done or can you do to build relationships?
4. What are local Indigenous people in that community or region working on? Is your organization directly supporting this work? Or have you asked if there are ways that support would be welcome?
5. Do Indigenous people in that area have stewardship/ownership/free and full access to their land and water? Do they have partial access? Are you fighting for them to have stewardship/ownership/free and full access? If not, why not?
6. Do Indigenous people in that area have access to clean drinking water? Water for agriculture or other needs? Are Indigenous people being exposed to a higher level of toxins? *Note: the US and Canadian governments have placed an extraordinarily high percentage of extractive industries/waste dumps on tribal lands.*
7. Do Indigenous people in that area have access to stable, well-paying employment or good culturally-relevant education? What are the history and current manifestations of colonization in that area that have contributed to the conditions that Indigenous people there face today?

## Questions for thinking through your strategy

1. What are Indigenous people in that area calling for - their visions or demands? What would achieving those visions mean for the work you are doing? If there are not active campaigns in your area, you can use the visions or demands of formations like the [Indigenous Environmental Network](#), [Unist'ot'en Camp](#), and [NDN Collective](#) to assess this question.

2. Do the visions and demands of your organizing campaigns align with Indigenous visions and demands? If so, how? If no, why not? How can you work towards better supporting those visions or demands?
3. Are any of the goals of your campaigns oppositional or in tension with the visions and demands of Indigenous people? For example, conservation work that limits access to land that Indigenous people use, or campaigns that reject a pipeline or plan for fracking but don't support Indigenous peoples' overarching demands for sovereignty and their ability to make decisions about what happens on their land, especially if it's not part of their federally recognized land.
4. Who is involved in developing your campaigns/strategies/goals? If you have not deeply included or consulted Indigenous people in the process, make that a priority.
5. Who do you consider your organization to be accountable to around aligning your strategies with Indigenous visions and work? Do you/your organization have a political compass that helps you discern whose leadership you are accountable to? How are you avoiding tokenization?
  - a. Does your political compass help you discern the nuanced differences between tribal government, traditional leadership, and grassroots leadership?
  - b. For accountability: What is going well? Where is there room for growth? What kinds of feedback are you getting? Are you soliciting feedback and who from?

### **Questions around resources and representation**

1. Do you have clear partnership agreements with Indigenous communities in the areas where you are working? *Note: Partnership agreements around issues such as funding, media work, and how your work includes or relates to Indigenous communities can help make sure you're not making assumptions about what is wanted, needed or acceptable.*
2. How are you giving, sharing and/or raising resources with Indigenous organizing in your area? *Note: only 0.23% of all philanthropy goes to Indigenous-led work (First Nations Development Institute), so be intentional about sharing resources such as: funding, relationships and connections, media contacts, legal representation, skills and capacity. As you give and share resources, ensure that you are not trying to maintain control.*
3. Who is getting the spotlight in your work? Who are the spokespeople and who is getting media attention? Who gets credit when something succeeds? If there are Indigenous

people/organizers/communities who could be the ones representing the work, do work such as media training and redirecting media to Indigenous communities to ensure that happens.

4. Have you or your organization joined Indigenous-led fights and then gotten media attention, funding, or other support that you didn't redirect back to the Indigenous leaders/communities? If so, what repair can you do? What can you do to prevent this from happening in the future? What conversations and agreements have you made with your Indigenous partners about fundraising and media work?
5. As we know from movements like Standing Rock where police were arresting and imprisoning people, Indigenous leaders are targeted and are almost always the ones who do longer prison sentences. If you are doing actions or part of movements where people are being arrested, how are you thinking about that, being intentional about not creating situations where Indigenous people are taking risks they haven't consented to, and supporting Indigenous people who may be arrested?

**In organizing with Indigenous communities, it's crucial to learn about the history and current reality of colonization in that area. This is something we consistently hear from Indigenous people who are working with non-Indigenous people. Here are some questions you can ask to help guide your learnings.**

1. What did historical colonization look like on that land?
2. What does current colonization look like on that land? What has been the impact to Indigenous people? The land and ecosystem?
3. Have there been any treaties relating to that land? According to the Indigenous nations, under what conditions were the treaties signed? How are these treaties being broken? Where would you find out what treaty responsibilities cover the lands that you live on (if those lands are under treaty)?
4. Were there any Indian Boarding Schools (forced residential schools run by the government or churches, sometimes called 'industrial schools') or missions here? When did they close? What can you find about the origin, history, and impact of these boarding schools?
5. Have Indigenous people tried to pass as white and/or assimilate into another culture in order to survive?

6. When and how were Indigenous people killed or forcibly displaced? How is this still happening there? I.e. displacement through land theft, high rates of incarceration, police violence, missing or murdered Indigenous women, suicide, or other ways.
7. Where do your electricity, water, and other resources come from? What more can you learn about the impacts of resource colonialism--from extraction to processing to waste disposal--on Indigenous lands and water? What can you learn about how the accelerated impacts of climate change due to these processes land on Indigenous communities.
8. Where have Indigenous people resisted colonization and what can we learn from the ways Indigenous people have and are resisting on this land?