



Ottawa Dialogue on Traditional Knowledge, Biodiversity and Health: Restoring Trust, Strengthening Partnerships, and Advancing Indigenous-Led Pathways

Ottawa, 1–2 October 2025, University of Ottawa, Canada

Twenty-five participants, including Indigenous Elders, knowledge holders, community leaders, researchers, policymakers, medical practitioners and UN representatives, gathered at the University of Ottawa for the *Ottawa Dialogue on Traditional Knowledge, Biodiversity and Health: Restoring Trust, Strengthening Partnerships, and Advancing Indigenous-Led Pathways*.

Organized by the World Health Organization (WHO) in collaboration with Indigenous Peoples' Centre for Documentation, Research and Information (Docip), the Ārramāt Project and Tinninan Canada Association, the two-day Dialogue advanced co-development of WHO's forthcoming Framework on Indigenous Knowledge, Biodiversity and Health. Within WHO, the initiative is coordinated and supported by the Global Traditional Medicine Centre (GTMC) and the Environment, Climate Change and One Health Department, working in close collaboration with Indigenous partners across the seven sociocultural regions.

Held during the 10th anniversary of Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Final Report (TRC) events, the Dialogue anchored discussions in truth-telling, reparative justice and respectful and rights-based engagement.

Opening reflections: Truth, responsibility and respect

Elder Claudette Commanda, Algonquin Anishinaabe Elder and Chancellor of the University of Ottawa, opened with a land acknowledgement, ceremonial blessing and welcome. Grounding her message in the sacredness of children and the responsibilities of truth and reconciliation, she honoured the sacred elements – earth, water, air and fire – and called for love, respect and intergenerational responsibility. She reminded participants that Indigenous knowledge must not be extracted or appropriated, but honoured, protected and guided by Indigenous voices.

Cristina Romanelli, WHO Biodiversity and Health Focal Point, opened the Dialogue on behalf of WHO noting that it coincided with the TRC's 10-year milestone; a reminder that reconciliation is a living responsibility grounded in respect, healing and recognition of Indigenous rights and knowledge systems. She emphasized that the Dialogue, guided by respect, reciprocity and accountability, was designed to support Indigenous leadership in global health and biodiversity governance in line with the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) and other international instruments. Reaffirming WHO's commitment to shift from consultation to co-creation in the

development of the Framework, she underscored WHO's role in the Dialogue to listen, learn and walk alongside Indigenous partners towards a blueprint for respectful engagement across all seven sociocultural regions.

High-level segment: Grounding the Framework in lived realities

Presentations from First Nations, Inuit and Métis leaders offered essential insights that shaped the Framework's normative, operational and legal foundations, anchored in respect, reciprocity, free, prior and informed consent (FPIC), equity and holistic understandings of health and biodiversity, grounded in Indigenous rights and worldviews as central to health and environmental stewardship.

The Honourable Margo Greenwood (O.C., PhD, FRSC), Senator from British Columbia and highly respected scholar of Cree ancestry, delivered a powerful, truth-telling address on the ongoing impacts of colonialism, racism and systemic exclusion. She stressed that transformation begins by recognizing diverse ways of knowing, the intrinsic relationship between Peoples and land, and rights affirmed in law. Citing the TRC's Calls to Action and UNDRIP, she called for structural change in health governance – anchored in self-determination, cultural safety and respect for Indigenous healing practices – and noted that lasting change occurs when Indigenous Peoples exercise voice, agency and authority within systems grounded in their rights and knowledge systems.

Ms Aluki Kotierk, an Inuk leader from Iqaluit, Nunavut and Chair of the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues (UNPFII), offered a deeply personal reflection on healing, trust and system transformation. Through family stories, she showed how Inuit knowledge, care and love are carried across generations – grounded in relationships to one another, to the land and to all life – and contrasted this with clinical experiences where holistic care was absent. Drawing on UNDRIP and the TRC's Calls to Action, she urged health systems to recognize Indigenous Peoples as whole beings and rights-holders, and to rebuild trust through inclusion, respect and representation. She emphasized that Indigenous Peoples should not be celebrated for their resilience but supported to thrive through systems that honour their knowledge, protocols, languages, values and dignity.

Victoria Pruden, a proud Michif Iskwew and President of the Métis National Council, spoke of *Wahkotowin*, or kinship, a keystone of Métis traditional knowledge and natural law that teaches the profound interconnectedness of all life and the responsibilities that flow from it. She emphasized that the wellness of lands, waters, animals and natural harvests is inseparable from health and community well-being. Reflecting on ties between Traditional Medicine, healing plants and intergenerational knowledge, she underscored that safeguarding biodiversity sustains Métis identity and resilience. She called for knowledge-sharing to move beyond consultation towards safe spaces for Indigenous leadership, where distinct nations shape decisions and frameworks that honour rights, governance and worldviews.

Graeme Reed, Senior Policy Advisor to the Assembly of First Nations, of mixed Anishinaabe and European descent, linked biodiversity, climate and health through First Nations knowledge systems that affirm the inseparability of the health of the land and the health of the people. Honouring survivors of residential institutions and the legacy of Joyce Echaquan, he called for reconciliation grounded in equity and cultural safety. He outlined the Assembly's *First Nations Climate Lens*: a framework connecting biodiversity loss, climate change, Indigenous health and well-being by identifying colonial values driving imbalance and urged a return to land-based relationships and Indigenous ways of knowing as pathways to restoration. He emphasized that reconciliation requires rebalancing power and creating space for Indigenous self-determination in health and biodiversity governance.

Normative coherence and legal underpinnings

Q'apaj Conde Choque an Aymara lawyer from Bolivia and Programme officer of the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), Article 8(j), highlighted the new Subsidiary Body on Article 8(j) and Programme of Work which recognize and safeguard traditional knowledge as a historic step centring Indigenous Peoples leadership in the biodiversity agenda. He noted that the Kunming Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework affirms Indigenous-managed territories, customary use and traditional food systems as vital to ecosystem and human health and underscored the non-diminishment clause safeguarding Indigenous rights and the need for legal coherence.

Dr Geetha Krishnan, an Ayurvedic physician and WHO Technical Officer, explained that GTMC was established to catalyse ancestral wisdom alongside modern science for the health of people and the planet, with a dedicated workstream on biodiversity, Indigenous Peoples and traditional knowledge. He reaffirmed that Indigenous Peoples are rights-holders and that FPIC, respect and reciprocity must guide co-design of the new WHO Framework. The second WHO Global Summit on Traditional Medicine (17–19 December 2025) will further this collaboration.

From lived experience to co-creation

In subsequent sessions, Dr Mariam Wallet Aboubakrine, a Tuareg doctor from Timbuktu, Mali and Co-Principal Investigator of the Ārramăt Project, and Dr Ojistoh Horn, a Mohawk/Haudenosaunee physician and President of the Indigenous Physicians Association of Canada, shared perspectives that grounded the discussion in lived experience and community realities.

Dr Horn's intervention offered a powerful bridge between medical science and Indigenous knowledge and worldviews. Her message underscored how Indigenous physicians occupy an essential space at the intersection of human, women's and environmental health, emphasizing the inseparability of these domains. She illustrated that Indigenous health

must be understood within ecological and gendered contexts, reinforcing the draft Framework's holistic and intersectoral approach. Drawing on the Two-Row Wampum Treaty, she reminded participants that true health arises from stewardship, balance and mutual respect.

Dr Aboubakrine described Ārramăt, a Tamacheq term for a state of health and well-being shared by people and biodiversity, as a guiding approach for Indigenous-led research that bridges local and global action. Lessons learned from the international project, spanning 26 countries, showed how it informs principles of co-creation, knowledge protection and Indigenous leadership.

The morning sessions closed with an informal lunch hosted by University of Ottawa President Marie-Eve Sylvestre, reaffirming the University's commitment to reconciliation through education, research and partnership.

Co-creating principles for respectful engagement

Initial draft elements of the Framework were co-presented by Rodrigo Paillalef, a Mapuche lawyer from Chile, working with Docip and Cristina Romanelli (WHO), who also co-moderated the breakout sessions that continued through Day 2.

In these focused exchanges, participants shaped the Framework's normative, operational and legal foundations – emphasizing FPIC, Indigenous data sovereignty, intergenerational and gender equity, cultural safety and the centrality of traditional knowledge systems. They also underscored the importance of respecting Indigenous protocols in all aspects of engagement, from how knowledge is shared and interpreted to how consent, ceremony, timing and representation are approached as integral expressions of Indigenous law and self-determination, including the time required for community consultation and collective input. Discussions also centred around how, in Indigenous worldviews, health and biodiversity are inseparable from territory and stewardship, and that language, gender, youth and Elder inclusion are vital to knowledge transmission, trust and collective healing.

Opening Day 2, Professor Sophie Thériault (Dean, Civil Law Section, University of Ottawa) reflected on the responsibilities of gathering on Algonquin Anishinaabe territory and the role of universities in upholding rights affirmed in UNDRIP and CBD Article 8(j). Her remarks set the tone for discussions on institutional roles and accountability, bridging education, research and governance to advance Indigenous rights and equity in health and biodiversity decision-making.

Next steps

Outcomes from the Dialogue will inform the draft WHO Framework on Indigenous Knowledge, Biodiversity and Health, to be shared with Indigenous Peoples across the



seven sociocultural regions and presented at the first meeting of the CBD Subsidiary Body on Article 8(j) (27–30 October 2025, Panama) for further consultation and at the second WHO Global Summit on Traditional Medicine (17–19 December 2025, India).

Contributions from Elders, knowledge holders and Indigenous leaders contribute to shaping the Framework’s core pillars: trust, reciprocity, FPIC, equity and a holistic understanding of health and biodiversity grounded in Indigenous rights and worldviews. Centring rights, relationships and reciprocity, the Dialogue laid a foundation for strengthened Indigenous-led engagement in global health and biodiversity governance, anchored in trust, partnership and co-creation as guiding principles for the work ahead.

Photo courtesy of Jacques-Elie Don

Group photo left to right: Cristina Romanelli (WHO Programme Officer), Victoria Pruden (President, Métis National Council), the Honourable Margo Greenwood, Senator for British Columbia), Aluki Kotierk (Chair of the United Nations Forum on Indigenous Issues), Mariam Wallet Aboubakrine (Ărramăt Co-Principal Investigator), Rodrigo Paillalef (UNPFII member from Chile working with Docip) and Graeme Reed (Strategic Adviser, Assembly of First Nations).