Sustainable Involvement of Indigenous Peoples in AI

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Abstract—**This paper examines including Indigenous perspectives into data ethics strategies and artificial intelligence practices as part of a corporate reconciliation commitment. Through three workshops with First Nations, Inuit, and Métis Peoples, the research explored Indigenous Knowledge, data ethics, and responsible AI use.**

The study identified three key themes: respecting Indigenous data sovereignty, ensuring Indigenous involvement in AI development, and implementing distinctions-based approaches. Case studies demonstrate practical applications, including the OCAP® principles learning circle, AI image declaration, and partnerships with Indigenous-owned technology companies.

Key findings emphasize the importance of distinctions-based approaches, including Indigenous data sovereignty principles, and involving Indigenous Peoples across multiple levels of AI development and governance. The findings conclude that prioritizing Indigenous involvement in emerging technologies is crucial for ethical innovation and advancing reconciliation while fostering sustainable, community-driven outcomes.

Keywords—Ethics; Responsible Innovation; Responsible AI; Human-centric design; Data Ethics; Indigenous Peoples; Case study

BACKGROUND

As Chief Justice Murray Sinclair has stated, "Reconciliation is not an Aboriginal problem - it involves all of us". TELUS, in partnership with Indigenous Peoples, is committed to progressing the path of reconciliation in a deeply meaningful way, and is dedicated to fulfilling its roles and responsibilities in alignment with Indigenous-led frameworks for reconciliation [1]. This commitment is informed by the following:

- [Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada: Calls to Action](#)
- [United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples](#)
- [Reclaiming Power and Place: The Final Report of the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women & Girls](#)

The United Nations Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's (TRC) Call to Action #92 emphasizes corporate Canada to adopt UNDRIP as a framework for reconciliation. As stated by the TRC, "We remain convinced that the United Nations Declaration provides the necessary principles, norms, and standards for reconciliation to flourish in twenty-first-century Canada" [2]. Reconciliation is about addressing past wrongs done to Indigenous Peoples, making amends, and improving relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples to create a better future for all. [3].

A reconciliation framework can guide the corporate sector to function in ways that are consistent with UNDRIP [4]. As part of TELUS' reconciliation journey, a commitment to support the inclusion of Indigenous perspectives into TELUS' data ethics strategy was established in 2023 as part of the Indigenous Reconciliation Action Plan. In support of this commitment, TELUS and Two Worlds Consulting started a process of collective learning and relationship-building. The initial approach involves creating spaces to bring First Nations, Inuit and Métis Peoples together to discuss the responsible use of artificial intelligence (AI). TELUS' engagement strategy is informed through ongoing feedback from members of TELUS' Indigenous Advisory Council (IAC). The IAC is a non-partisan advisory council composed of Indigenous community members and subject matter experts. IAC's mandate is to monitor the progress of TELUS' engagement and reconciliation strategies and provide guidance

and advice for effective implementation of TELUS' commitments and targets [5].

The voices of Indigenous Peoples must be prioritized to foster sustainable involvement in AI and support data sovereignty ensuring Indigenous control over data about themselves and their territories, upholding their rights and cultural context. As AI is a technology which uses data, it is critical to start the conversation by understanding the concept of data from Indigenous perspectives. Indigenous data goes beyond being data about individuals or communities. It encompasses a broader understanding that includes everything about Indigenous Peoples, such as their lands, languages, resources, and more. This expands the conventional Western understanding of data, which typically focuses on individual-level information. Recognizing the holistic nature of Indigenous data is crucial for data ethics in Indigenous reconciliation efforts. It emphasizes the need to respect and protect not only personal information but also cultural, historical, and environmental aspects that are integral to Indigenous communities [6].

AI is a transformative innovation which can augment human capabilities when applied meaningfully. The rapid development of AI has prompted broader conversations about how to set limits for the use of AI and how to govern its use. In building out a practice of data ethics, TELUS has explored participatory approaches to help evaluate potential impacts of AI on people and society. This means enabling those impacted by emerging technology, to understand how it is developed, used and have a voice in shaping its possibilities. Education and dialogue are essential for shaping this space. Research has revealed that more than half of the respondents from TELUS' 2024 AI Report believe that AI governance should include community consultation to ensure that diverse perspectives are considered, and bias is minimized [7].

TELUS' approach to ethical data management in the context of AI includes engagement with Indigenous Peoples to build a better understanding of Indigenous data sovereignty for distinct communities. This paper will share insights from a series of engagements conducted with First Nations, Inuit and Métis Peoples across Canada to identify strategies for data and AI governance and examples of ways that Indigenous voices can be uplifted through sustainable technology and innovation. An important aspect of AI governance as it relates to Indigenous data is defining the meaning of Indigenous data and building an understanding of principles of Indigenous data sovereignty.

Respecting principles of Indigenous data sovereignty supports Indigenous self-determination and can contribute to reconciliation, by enhancing trust between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples. There are several frameworks both in Canada and internationally that describe principles of Indigenous data sovereignty [8]. Efforts are being made at various levels from community-specific initiatives to national

strategies that support Indigenous Peoples' right to control, access, and manage their own data.

The growing volume of Indigenous data that is gathered digitally in the age of AI is also increasing the need for data management protocols that align with established Indigenous data sovereignty principles (such as OCAP®[1] and CARE[2]). The First Nations Information Governance Centre (FNIGC) describes Indigenous data sovereignty as the right of Indigenous Peoples to govern their data, including how it is gathered, owned, and used [9]. This right is fundamental to preserving cultural integrity, supporting self-determination, and addressing historical injustices, while enabling Indigenous communities to make informed decisions for their own governance, economic development, and social well-being. A crucial step to respectfully apply principles of Indigenous data sovereignty involves relationship-building with Indigenous Peoples to enhance trust to develop an understanding of their definitions of Indigenous Knowledge, data, and data management practices. This requires intentional action to learn and unlearn ideas related to data management and create spaces for dialogue and understanding.

MOVING FORWARD TOGETHER

This paper will present methodology and findings based on three workshop sessions that support meaningful conversations and the use of case studies with examples of actions taken within TELUS to center the voices of Indigenous communities through sustainable technology, innovation, and actions. The workshops were developed to support a culturally safe conversation with Indigenous community members regarding their perspectives about responsible uses of AI.

WORKSHOP METHODOLOGY

TELUS and Two Worlds Consulting (TWC) hosted three workshops with First Nations, Inuit and Métis Peoples to support the inclusion of Indigenous perspectives into TELUS' data ethics strategy. The workshops focused primarily on Indigenous Knowledge and data, ethical data handling practices, and the responsible use of AI at TELUS. Three *What We Heard* reports were produced to summarize perspectives, guidance, and recommendations shared by workshop participants.

The methodology for each workshop was respectful of the preferences and protocols of the workshop participants in each session. The methodology for developing culturally safe spaces for in-person and virtual workshops included:

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[1] Ownership, Access, Control, and Possession (OCAP®) principles of Indigenous data sovereignty are defined by the First Nations Information Governance Centre (FNIGC)

[2] Collective Benefit, Authority to Control, Responsibility, and Ethics (CARE) principles of Indigenous data sovereignty are defined by the Global Indigenous Data Alliance (GIDA)

● Sharing workshop agendas and pre-workshop materials for review with workshop participants for their comments and feedback.

● Opening each workshop with an introductory circle for all participants to share their backgrounds and roles at their respective organizations (including workshop participants, TELUS participants, and TWC team members).

● Closing each workshop with a closing circle for all participants to share final reflections.

● In virtual settings, providing the option to share perspectives verbally and use a virtual whiteboard to facilitate discussions (which can be used to have participants directly write their own inputs). In one workshop, TWC's facilitator also opted to stop using the virtual whiteboard out of respect for the preferences expressed by workshop participants during that session.

● In virtual settings, providing the option of having cameras on or off for discussion.

● In both in-person and virtual settings, encouraging participants to take breaks, have meals or refreshments, and to respect their needs if they needed to excuse themselves.

● For the in-person workshop, providing the opportunity to share written input on Post-it notes and also verbally.

● Sharing *What We Heard* reports with all workshop participants for their review, comments, and validation. This included multiple options for sharing feedback, with opportunities to provide comments in the documents, via e-mails, or by phone call.

DATA LIMITATIONS

The TELUS IAC guided the team to engage directly with First Nations, Inuit and Métis Peoples. The series of workshops is another step in this ongoing dialogue, building on preliminary conversations with Indigenous Peoples in 2023.

The workshop participants were contacted and selected based on recommendations from Two Worlds Consulting, pre-existing relationships with TELUS and insights from TELUS' IAC. These initial engagements are foundational to support advancements towards Indigenous data sovereignty, however engagement in three workshop sessions is not representative of all distinct perspectives of First Nations, Inuit, and Métis Peoples.

The authors note that the workshop sessions included representatives from First Nations national organizations and Métis Nations and governments. There was limited engagement with Inuit participants at the workshop sessions. There were some Inuit participants in the workshop sessions, however these engagements did not include representatives from national or international Inuit organizations such as the Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami or the Inuit Circumpolar Council. It should be noted that invitations were extended to the above organizations and that TELUS looks forward to future opportunities for collaboration. TELUS also recognizes the limited capacity and consultation fatigue experienced by many Indigenous Peoples.

SUSTAINABLE INVOLVEMENT OF INDIGENOUS PEOPLES IN AI

Three main themes were identified through the workshop sessions. Each theme raised in the workshop sessions will be explored below, followed by a case study outlining TELUS' approach to inform sustainable involvement of Indigenous Peoples in AI. Although the three themes are analyzed separately, they are interrelated areas of focus and are all of equal importance to inform sustainable involvement of Indigenous peoples in AI.

THEME #1: RESPECTING DATA SOVEREIGNTY

At all three workshops, participants shared the importance for TELUS to include opportunities for Indigenous Peoples to assert their data sovereignty principles following a distinctions-based approach. Workshop participants shared the following perspectives about Indigenous data sovereignty principles:

● It is important to develop distinct applications of OCAP® for First Nations, to reflect distinct perspectives of First Nations communities across Canada. Métis workshop participants also indicated the need for the development of Métis-specific principles of data sovereignty.

● Indigenous data sovereignty principles extend to all parts of Indigenous data management, including Data Sharing Agreements and Information Sharing Agreements. Participants raised questions about culturally respectful alternatives that could parallel formal agreements, or possible ways to tailor formal agreements to meet the respective community's data sovereignty principles [10].

Workshop participants also shared concerns for TELUS to consider that may affect Indigenous data sovereignty:

● Indigenous data may be shared with industries, government or other external agencies without their knowledge, which would affect their data sovereignty due to uncertainty about how the Indigenous data would be used, where it is stored, who can access and control the data [11].

● Intellectual Property and ownership and/or stewardship of information generated by AI, which could affect their assertion of data sovereignty [12]. Participants noted that more guardrails were needed because the current approach to data collection and use is not holistic, lacks community connection and requires guardrails to mitigate potential impacts from misuse of AI [13].

CASE STUDY THEME #1: TELUS LEARNING CIRCLE FOR OCAP® PRINCIPLES AND AI IMAGE DECLARATION

There are several frameworks and protocols that outline Indigenous rights as it relates to their own data. Prior to engaging in conversations about Indigenous data sovereignty, data ethics, and AI, a foundation of understanding must be established. The Fundamentals of OCAP® course developed by FNIGC introduces topics such as First Nations self-determination, self-governance, and collective rights to data sovereignty through the framework of The First Nations

Principles of OCAP® [14]. The Fundamentals of OCAP® provides data management protocols that align with established Indigenous data sovereignty principles and is increasingly important to incorporate as businesses navigate the proliferation of data as a result of AI. This course is internationally recognized for its immersive storytelling and foundational teaching of the OCAP® principles. In addition, it was important to choose a course that incorporates a Canadian context when discussing First Nations data. As such, this course was selected and sponsored for cross-functional team members across the business that work directly with or interact with data and want to learn about how to respect the principles of OCAP®. Team members registered in the OCAP® course regularly engage and share learnings in a learning circle that was created as a space for team members to gather and share experiences, understandings, and discuss potential applications of OCAP® as they worked through the course.

The Fundamentals of OCAP® provides learners with a tool to exercise data sovereignty, but it also provides team members with an understanding of community preferences, timelines, and distinctions-based approaches. Prior to engaging with Indigenous Peoples, it is important to share these understandings. For example, a common concern shared throughout the workshops was a lack of capacity in communities and the request for consultation to move as fast as the slowest community member. Understanding this background prior to attending workshops and other initiatives can support better trust and engagement between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples.

Indigenous data sovereignty is also crucial for the ethical use of technology and AI. As part of TELUS' engagement with Indigenous Peoples, significant concerns were raised about the impact of generative AI on Indigenous art, artists and visual representations of Indigenous Peoples. Generative AI technology is known to appropriate Indigenous cultures and reproduce harmful images that may perpetuate stereotypes, inaccuracies, and even offensive representations [15].

In alignment with respecting Indigenous data sovereignty principles and feedback from the IAC, TELUS declared that it will not use AI to create or replicate the art of or imagery of Indigenous Peoples [16]. This decision is one small step in the ongoing learning about how to support Indigenous rights within our data ecosystem. In support of the commitment to artistic integrity, TELUS commissioned Ken Letander, an Ojibway artist, to create artwork titled "Honour by Design" which explores the concepts of use of AI by Indigenous Peoples.

THEME #2: INVOLVING INDIGENOUS PEOPLES IN THE DEVELOPMENT AND USE OF AI

At all three workshops, participants shared the importance of Indigenous involvement in AI, and described opportunities in the following areas:

● Include Indigenous Peoples in areas such as education, training, collaboration, and Indigenous data sovereignty;
● Build and nurture digital literacy through AI-related training
● Increasing Indigenous involvement in the development of models; and,
● Provide opportunities for Indigenous Peoples in review/advisory roles in areas such as purple-teaming or reviewing generative AI content.

Workshop participants also shared concerns for consideration related to Indigenous involvement in AI:

● AI technologies are already pervasive, and Indigenous communities feel they are trying to catch up; and
● There are capacity concerns (including funding, timelines, number of staff, etc.) for Indigenous communities when considering AI, which can make AI difficult to prioritize while balancing other governance and community priorities.

Workshop participants identified a need for training around AI and data literacy and stressed that there is a struggle between the need for AI tools, and having the capacity to establish data governance and assert sovereignty over their own data [17].

Workshop participants voiced concerns about the rapid development and use of AI, and capacity barriers for Indigenous communities to be involved in the development and use of AI. Some participants noted that capacity limited their ability to engage with TELUS at the pace that TELUS requested, and that any decision-making timelines needed to include time for Indigenous Peoples to gather approval from community members [18].

CASE STUDY THEME #2: INDIGENOUS INVOLVEMENT IN AI

As expressed in the workshops, the accelerated growth of AI is a concern for many Indigenous groups. Additionally, 35% of respondents who identify as Indigenous Peoples in the TELUS 2024 AI Report state they feel that AI is biased against them [19]. As the Canadian government moves forward with a $2.4 billion investment in AI, the technology is advancing faster than efforts to ensure equitable access and oversight [20]. AI development must prioritize digital sovereignty to ensure that governance practices, privacy, and technological control remain in the hands of Indigenous Peoples. Without this, AI will not close existing social and economic gaps; it will deepen them [21].

CASE STUDY THEME #2 PURPLE TEAMING WITH PLATO

The rapid adoption of generative AI across businesses requires novel approaches to implementing AI responsibly. This means building, deploying, and governing AI in ways that are human-centric. Inspiration from the red teaming and blue teaming practices in cybersecurity provides a foundation for a collaborative approach of purple teaming that works to identify weaknesses, vulnerabilities and gaps through

adversarial testing. Bringing red and blue teams together allows for a comprehensive evaluation of the system and facilitates communication and knowledge sharing about both the way a system can be attacked and defended. This approach requires creative thinking and benefits from a cross-functional and multidisciplinary team. As such, TELUS extended their internal practices to build a Purple Team in partnership with PLATO Tech, an Indigenous-owned software testing and technology services company. PLATO runs several testing centers across Canada and focuses on making tech careers more accessible to create a more diverse industry.

In collaboration with TELUS' Responsible AI team, the PLATO Purple Team supported the adoption of generative AI across TELUS. The team focused on testing techniques and evaluation methods for AI-powered copilots. Copilots are built by TELUS team members to handle various tasks from taking notes and writing summaries to analyzing data, generating code, creating user interfaces, searching documents, and chatting with users. Through purple-teaming, the quality of copilots and team member guidance for development was improved.

This initiative focused on building a reciprocal relationship from the start. Members of the Purple Team are graduates of the PLATO Software Tester Training program which consists of five months of in-class training and a paid internship for individuals with a First Nation, Inuit, or Métis heritage [22]. Many of the graduates' experience with AI was limited prior to joining the Purple Team. TELUS provided extensive training on generative AI tooling and testing. Through this initiative, PLATO team members were provided with the opportunity to improve their use and familiarity of generative AI, and gain experience to conduct similar testing in their future work. From a business perspective, this supported PLATO to further enhance their business in this area with hands-on experience on how to test Generative AI co-pilots. TELUS benefited from PLATO fulfilling capacity needs for testing, and process enhancements contributed by the software testers such as building test plans, test cases and defect reports. Moreover, PLATO placed an Indigenous lens on AI work being done across the business and provided recommendations and opportunities for improvement.

THEME #3: DISTINCTIONS-BASED APPROACH FOR AI

There were different perspectives shared at each of the three workshops about distinctions-based approaches for First Nations, Inuit, and Métis data sovereignty principles as well as applications of AI. Workshop participants shared the following perspectives about distinctions-based approaches for AI:

● Workshop participants shared the importance of focusing on community level AI, that takes First Nations, Métis, and Inuit perspectives into consideration [23]
● Workshop participants shared that TELUS should include a distinctions-based approach for First Nations, Métis, and Inuit during AI development and testing [24]

Workshop participants also shared concerns to consider related to the lack of distinctions-based approaches for AI applications:

● AI technologies (and their underlying algorithms) are developed based on Western Knowledge systems and can be biased such that they were not inherently developed based on Indigenous Ways of Knowing [25].
● Data ethics frameworks that are applied in the context of AI are mainly focused on privacy of individuals. Currently, data privacy at TELUS is often managed by de-identifying data on an individual level [26].

CASE STUDY THEME #3: DISTINCTIONS BASED APPROACH FOR AI

TELUS engaged pipikwan pêhtâkwan to better understand Indigenous ethics as it applies to TELUS' use of large language models and generative AI tools. Existing AI systems are built on Western frameworks which often fail to represent or address the needs and worldviews of Indigenous Peoples. Additionally, current AI systems are known to perpetuate systemic biases, racism, exacerbate the exclusion of Indigenous knowledge and ultimately homogenize the representation of distinct Indigenous Peoples [27]. pipikwan pêhtâkwan shared how the use of current AI models can replicate colonial structure in digital spaces [28]. Developing ethical AI systems requires relational accountability and collaboration with Indigenous Peoples [29].

pipikwan pêhtâkwan advised TELUS by sharing information about their AI tool wâsikan kisewâtisiwin, which can be integrated with current AI systems and used to correct unconscious bias or racism directed to Indigenous Peoples. Their vision states that, "First Peoples are centered in the development [of AI] to ensure this critical piece of infrastructure is built without furthering harm to our communities" [30]. wâsikan kisewâtisiwin addresses the need for a distinctions based approach with their AI tool as it has been guided and informed by Indigenous Peoples in Canada including a diverse elder council. The tool aims to support understanding of cultural background, Indigenous perspectives and the unique needs of Indigenous communities. As such, it offers several ways of knowing and highlights how each community may be different.

Including Indigenous-led technology companies in AI development is crucial for creating ethical and culturally sensitive models that can counteract bias. pipikwan pêhtâkwan's AI tool centers Indigenous perspectives to provide a distinctions-based approach to correcting unconscious bias or racism towards Indigenous Peoples. As AI continues to shape our digital landscape, it is imperative that Indigenous Peoples are active participants at all stages of AI development.

SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

In summary, TELUS' approach to the ongoing involvement of Indigenous Peoples in AI is guided by engagement with TELUS' IAC, and TELUS continues to support reconciliation initiatives and Indigenous involvement in AI at many levels. TELUS has engaged directly with First Nations, Inuit, and Métis Peoples regarding their perspectives about AI and Indigenous data sovereignty, with the support of Two Worlds Consulting. TELUS includes Indigenous technical expertise in purple-teaming of AI in partnership with PLATO, and is engaging with tools like wâsikan kisewâtisiwin to better understand ethical AI development. TELUS team members are also engaging in training related to Indigenous data sovereignty so they can better apply these principles to their work.

TELUS recognizes the continuous nature of this work, and the engagements mentioned in this paper are foundational to future collaboration with Indigenous Peoples. By sharing this initial approach, TELUS aspires to provide a roadmap for other organizations to use in practice.

Based on TELUS' learnings from Indigenous involvement in AI to-date, the following key findings have been developed to support other organizations center Indigenous involvement in the space of sustainable technologies:

● Focus on applying a distinctions-based approach (including First Nations, Inuit, and Métis perspectives) to gather perspectives about AI and its applications, data ethics and data governance practices, and Indigenous data sovereignty.
● Include principles of Indigenous data sovereignty in privacy or technology impact assessments to support Indigenous assertion over their data and how their Indigenous data interacts with emerging technologies.
● Define a comparative framework with a set of criteria to track efforts related to Indigenous engagement and Indigenous involvement in applications of AI related to Indigenous data, and evaluate organizational progress against other organizations with similar initiatives [31].
● Involve Indigenous Peoples at multiple levels and functions related to applications of AI within an organization, including:
  ● AI governance (e.g., in leadership roles, in advisory committees)
  ● Purple-teaming and testing AI applications
  ● Indigenous-led training sessions for AI professionals related to Indigenous data sovereignty
  ● Procurements and partnerships with Indigenous businesses to support development and applications of AI, as well as data ethics related to AI
  ● Engagement with First Nations, Inuit, and Métis at a national level and at a grassroots level about perspectives about AI
  ● Understand the benefits of applications of AI as well as challenges for First Nations, Inuit, and Métis

communities and that these will be distinct depending on socio-environmental contexts and community priorities.

Prioritizing Indigenous involvement in emerging technologies such as AI is critical for ethical innovation and to strengthen sustainable and community-driven outcomes. Uplifting Indigenous communities in the development of AI can contribute to support of Indigenous self-determination, and foster relationship-building. These efforts contribute to advancing reconciliation and provide opportunities for technological progress to benefit Indigenous communities equitably. Increased Indigenous involvement in AI will help to shape a more inclusive and responsible technological future.

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