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Empowering Indigenous Voices:
Strengthening Clean Energy Pathways
through Knowledge Mobilization
for a Net-Zero Future

Utility & Clean Energy Employers Perspectives

Prepared by:
Johnston Research Inc.
Smart Microgrid Applied Research Team, BCIT

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Johnston Research

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Canada

Contents

1. PREFACE

The overall objective of this project is to create better pathways for Indigenous communities to participate in the clean energy sector. Canada is moving forward with goals for a net-zero economy by 2050, and Indigenous and remote communities are positioned to benefit from this transition, offering pathways to self-reliance, energy sovereignty, and sustainable jobs within this sector. However, systemic barriers hinder these communities from fully engaging in and benefiting from the clean energy sector. This project builds on insights from the previous phase of the "Empowering Diverse Communities with Skills Development through Virtual Experiential Learning" by implementing data-gathering activities such as surveys and interviews to assess knowledge levels, values, skills gaps, and needs within these communities. There are two reports associated with this project. This report focuses on data analysis from a Utility and Clean Energy Employer perspective. The companion report focuses on data analysis from an Indigenous perspective.

2. INTRODUCTION

Across Canada's northern, rural, and remote regions, Indigenous communities are reshaping the energy landscape—asserting sovereignty, demanding reliable and sustainable energy options, and redefining what respectful partnership looks like. The interviews collected for this report were conducted to understand that evolving landscape from the perspective of utilities, project staff, and Indigenous relations practitioners who work daily at the interface of technical systems and lived community realities. While the specific projects vary—microgrids, solar installations, transmission equity discussions—the voices across interviews resonated shared themes: a longing for trust built slowly, a desire for meaningful ownership rather than symbolic involvement, and a recognition that energy work cannot be separated from broader social and cultural priorities.

Across all sections of the report, a narrative emerges of complexity, responsibility, and aspiration. Participants describe the tensions of diesel dependency, the promise of locally owned renewables, the challenge of capacity constraints inside utilities, and the creative pathways communities take to assert autonomy. They speak to misconceptions, uneven learning systems, co-benefit opportunities, procurement as an engine of reconciliation, and Traditional Ecological Knowledge as both a guide and an underused resource. Together, these perspectives form a textured portrait of partnerships in motion—imperfect, hopeful, grounded in reality, and reaching toward something more durable. This introduction sets the stage for the section-by-section exploration that follows, framing the interviews not as scattered anecdotes but as interconnected insights illuminating the path toward respectful, co-owned energy futures.

3. METHODOLOGY

The primary methods applied in this project were Ownership, Control, Access, and Possession (OCAP) principles, primary data collection via interviews and survey data, and secondary data via corroborating evidence in the literature. OCAP was applied as follows: 1) interviews were voluntary, 2) interviewees could stop the participating at any point during the research project, 3) no recordings were made – all interviews were attended by 2 – 3 research witnesses including one lead interviewer and transcribers, 4) data results were shared via webinars that presented the data and allowed for questions and answers with the researchers, and 5) the final reports were posted online and shared with respondents in December 2025. Primary data collection occurred from June 2025 to December 2025. Secondary data were collected in December 2025. The report preparation and knowledge sharing occurred in December 2025. No interviews withdrew their data. All interview notes will be destroyed after 6 months.

Data sources included: attending conferences, online survey results and interview data. The types of conferences and events attended included:

1. AFN National Natural Resources Forum
2. Renewables in Remote Communities Conference
3. Clean Energy BC's Generate 2025
4. Indigenous Clean Energy's Changemakers Forum

This report was developed through a qualitative synthesis of all interview transcripts and notes collected over the summer and fall of 2025; 9 interviews were completed; however, the ideas and knowledge shard resonated accurately with the literature, suggesting that an acceptable breadth was reached among the population sampled. A snowball sampling was applied and the team consistently pursued interview options throughout the study period. Each interview was reviewed in full, and the content was reorganized into coherent sections based on the primary question or theme addressed. All participant statements were assigned to the section that most closely aligned with their meaning rather than where they happened to appear. When comments reflected peripheral or isolated experiences that did not support a broader pattern, they were excluded to preserve thematic clarity. The dominant ideas in each section were then distilled into narrative summaries that integrate participant quotes and relevant external literature to contextualize and strengthen the identified themes. The resulting report blends descriptive analysis with interpretive synthesis to create a cohesive, narrative–analytical account of what the interviews collectively reveal.

4. DETAILED FINDINGS

4.1 Local Ownership And Northern Complexity

Most interviewees described work concentrated in remote and largely populated Indigenous jurisdictions and emphasized that projects are often small, technically complex microgrids or community-scale renewables. Common elements: a heavy focus on diesel-to-renewables transitions, microgrid integration challenges, and the need to support communities with operations and maintenance planning so they can own and operate assets. Several participants stressed that the utility's role often includes technical assistance (design, integration, O&M training) and procurement rules that favour Indigenous participation. A repeated practical note: solar is attractive because it's lower-maintenance than other technologies, but even "simple" solar still requires O&M planning and local capacity. Multiple examples in the interview text (e.g., BC Hydro work in 14 non-integrated areas, microgrid builds, and ongoing Inuit projects) show this pattern of technical support & capacity building. Increasingly, Indigenous communities are assuming ownership and control of renewable energy projects, leading the way to a clean energy future (Heerema & Lovekin: 2019; Hoicka et. al.: 2021). Respondents agreed alike that "investing in clean energy solutions that reduce reliance on diesel fuel will support remote communities as they work to enhance their energy security and make small but meaningful contributions to self-determination and Reconciliation" (Canada Energy Regulator: 2023). "Nanticoke Solar LP is a joint venture with First Nations to build and operate a new solar facility on the site of a former coal-fuelled power plant in Ontario, Canada" (Hillsdon: 2024).

4.2 Energy Sovereignty and Diesel Reduction As Drivers

Across interviews there's a clear, consistent motivation: reduce diesel dependence while supporting community control of local energy (energy sovereignty). Respondents repeatedly tied the work to mandates (utilities' service obligations) and reconciliation goals, but also to practical needs — keeping the lights on in small microgrids and reducing GHGs. Several interviewees highlighted that governments have been providing grants that make Indigenous-led projects financially feasible, which in turn has driven interest and partnership opportunities. Participants emphasized the mutual benefits: communities gain revenue and sovereignty, utilities get cleaner, more reliable local generation and less diesel exposure. The dominant message is pragmatic and policy-driven (not purely rhetorical). Public programs and recent funding announcements corroborate the interviewees' claim that federal/provincial grants are a critical catalyst (Canada Energy Regulator: 2023).

4.3 Relationships Built Over Time, Not Transactions

Trust is portrayed as earned slowly: early engagement, meaningful consultation, consistent follow-through, culturally sensitive language, and long-term commitments are the recurring

requirements. Utility staff repeatedly emphasized that relationship work "starts long before the energy project" — it's about listening, respecting Elders' knowledge, and demonstrating reliability (doing what you said you would do). Practical trust-builders mentioned in the interviews include hiring community reps (billing/customer service), co-ownership opportunities (transmission or generation equity), and procurement practices that create sustained local work. Several contributors warned that technical terms or rushed timelines can erode trust (e.g., "curtailment" feels threatening if not explained). Comments solely focussed on internal utility bureaucracy were excluded - the clear consensus is that relationship management, time, and transparency are what matter. Public policy shifts toward Indigenous equity and co-ownership confirm the importance of genuine partnership as a trust mechanism (BC Hydro: 2025). "Engagement with our Indigenous partners is also underway, and this aligns with our commitment to co-design the environmental review and explore Indigenous co-ownership of the proposed North Coast Transmission Line, as well other means of Indigenous participation" (BC Hydro: 2025).

4.4 Common Misconceptions

Interviewees consistently reported several common misconceptions: that the utility "knows best," that Indigenous communities have unlimited capacity or that the utility has unlimited resources, and that land acknowledgements alone are sufficient. The

Many said misperceptions arise from uneven expectations on both sides — communities may expect utilities to operate or maintain locally owned plants indefinitely, while utilities sometimes expect fast uptake of technologies without allowing time for capacity building. A recurrent theme is that perception gaps are best addressed through training and face-to-face engagement: cultural awareness training, territorial acknowledgements plus real conversation, and direct education about technical/financial constraints. Research and reporting about respectful consent and Indigenous rights in energy transitions reiterate that misunderstandings and rights considerations are central issues. A common myth found in the literature not mentioned in the interviews as that Indigenous communities have ample land and can do whatever they want with it. "Reserve land makes up a tiny fraction of the total landmass in Canada (0.2%). Furthermore, land use is often restricted by the Indian Act or other agreements, and in many cases, Indigenous communities do not own subsoil rights to resources found there" (Hepp et al.: 2025).

4.5 Soft Skills and Project Delivery Expertise

There's strong agreement that both "soft" and "hard" skills are required: communications, cultural competence, listening, relationship management, and patience, together with project management, engineering, legal and O&M expertise. Multiple respondents said Indigenous Relations teams must have parity with environment and project delivery functions, and that dedicated internal resources are essential. Interviewees emphasized that communities' needs differ: some want district-scale solutions, others focus on

housing efficiency — so utilities need flexible capacity and skilled project managers who can stitch together procurement, financing and training. Training on Indigenous history and TEK listening was repeatedly flagged as a "muscle" that needs ongoing exercise rather than a one-off workshop. The data suggested that technical skills alone would not suffice; rather the dominant consensus is holistic skills / capability. The broader literature on Indigenous clean energy leadership likewise highlights the combination of governance, finance, technical skills and cultural protocols as success factors. "Capacity building and skills transfer are equally critical in empowering indigenous communities to engage with and benefit from sustainable energy technologies" (Mawere & Mukonza: 2024). Projects like Indigenous Clean Energy are governed an Indigenous Borad of Directors and an Advisory Council that provide oversight and input to ensure programming brings the maximum benefits to Indigenous Peoples. The skill sets required to work with and be supportive of Indigenous regulators bodies, on the part of utilities, goes beyond technical/legal knowledge to include deep cultural competency, relationship building (nation-to-nation), understanding Indigenous laws/customs, economic reconciliation, and capacity development support, focusing on self-determination, benefit sharing (equity, jobs, revenue), and aligning with Indigenous governance for meaningful participation in energy projects, not just compliance.

4.6 Capacity and Funding Constraints Inside Utilities

Interviewees consistently pointed to resource constraints — time, funding, and recruitment challenges — as barriers to building internal capacity. Several organizations struggle to recruit local staff (especially in Nunavut) and end up hiring southern expertise, which introduces housing/logistics challenges. Another common theme: absence of a coherent Indigenous strategy in some utilities — work is done piecemeal and relies on a few champions rather than institutionalized implementation strategies and guidelines. Many respondents noted that transformational projects (grid, procurement, O&M) take years and iterative learning, so patience and sustained funding are necessary. Most staff described ongoing capacity gaps and the need for stable funding to hire grant/project managers. National and provincial programs are indeed funding remote community energy work, but more often fund projects more readily than long-term strategies.

4.7 Practical Wins Come Through Employment and Procurement

Across interviews, the most tangible wins are in procurement and contractor work (vegetation management, construction), plus targeted employment programs (Inuit employment targets, internships, "professionals under development"). Several utilities use procurement weighting or minimum local content rules to give Indigenous firms a foothold, and some will single-source or pay premiums strategically to help firms stand up. Education-to-career pathways were noted as weak spots: participants said engineering and professional roles are underrepresented in Indigenous hires and that efforts often focus on trades rather than technical professions. Respondents repeatedly described

internships, liaison roles (billing/customer service), and local training as helpful, but uncoordinated. This pattern (procurement + internships + targeted hiring) matches other documented approaches for building Indigenous economic capacity in energy (Canada Energy Regulator: 2023)

4.8 People-First Retention and Flexible Career Paths

Interviewees emphasized "people-first" strategies — work-life balance, culturally relevant supports, counselling, cultural days, and mentorship — as important retention measures after hiring. Several utilities also lean on procurement to create ongoing contract opportunities for Indigenous businesses, and use rotational professional development programs to shepherd candidates into full roles. The common refrain: recruitment without retention plans or culturally safe workplaces will not deliver long-term career pathways. Some respondents noted a lack of formal leadership programs specifically targeted at Indigenous employees; others described ad hoc but meaningful supports. The consistent message is that workforce supports exist but need scale and systematization.

4.9 Ownership Through Procurement and Co-Investment

Most participants highlighted procurement levers (minimum Indigenous employment/content clauses), single/sole-sourcing in targeted categories, PPAs (power purchase agreements) and co-investment models as the main pathways for Indigenous ownership. There was a consistent theme that non-integrated areas have standing offers for solar and that communities are increasingly the builders/owners of their renewables, generating revenue and local control. Respondents also pointed to larger strategic opportunities: transmission projects and large generation can be structured with equity participation (some interviewees mentioned 25–50% Indigenous ownership targets). The consensus was that entrepreneur support exists but is uneven and often opportunistic rather than programmatic. Recent coverage and policy announcements show growing moves toward Indigenous equity in large projects, reinforcing the interview pattern. "The ownership of energy projects has shifted due to significant payments made by developers to Indigenous peoples through benefit agreements and other programs. These payments have enabled Indigenous groups to establish successful businesses in the energy sector and gain financial capacity to acquire equity interests in energy assets. A notable example is the Fort McKay and Mikisew Cree First Nations, which purchased a 49 percent interest in the East Tank Farm from Suncor for $503 million in 2017" (Perry et al.: 2020).

4.10 Training Institutions and Networks

Interview data shows a mixed picture: some collaboration exists within most of the respondents (local colleges and institutes), but many respondents said those partnerships are limited by capacity or by the absence of local trades programs. Several people noted that some Indigenous organizations (e.g., Indigenous power authorities, regional colleges) are active in training and grant support, while others reported only informal or project-level

partnerships. The consistent message is that institutional partnerships matter, but training infrastructure in many northern/rural areas is still thin. Overall, the interviews point to a growing network of Indigenous training partners but one that's still developing.

4.11 Indigenous Values are Aspirationally Integrated

Interviewees consistently reported that Indigenous cultural values are increasingly informing project planning — e.g., Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit (IQ) values used as organizational guides, land acknowledgements, elder blessings, site-specific consultations and protections for culturally sensitive features. But several respondents also admitted this is "getting better" rather than complete. Some utilities have mature Incident Response (IR) teams and mandatory cultural training, while others implement values more superficially. The consensus is aspirational: organizations are trying to embed protocols in project design, procurement and consultation, but many see gaps and a need for more systematic practices. Notably multiple participants said, "we can do better." Recent government and utility practice guidance also emphasizes protocols and cultural integration as evolving standards (e.g., Standards for Our Energy Future).

4.12 Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) Is Used, But Mostly Reactively

Almost every respondent agreed TEK is important but under-utilized; integration tends to be project-specific and often reactive (e.g., adjusting dam operations to protect fish spawning after impacts are noticed) rather than proactively embedded in planning. A few strong examples were cited where TEK was included meaningfully (fish ladder projects, storytelling sessions for senior management), but the dominant message is that formal processes for TEK integration are uncommon. Interviewees urged more proactive TEK inclusion early in siting, design and environmental planning. The clear practical pattern is reactive incorporation that needs formalization. Academic and project case studies echo that TEK integration is both valuable and inconsistently applied in energy work across Canada (Galappaththi: 2019).

4.13 Learning Systems Exist but are Uneven

Most utilities use learning management systems (LMS) platforms (SAP SuccessFactors, internal LMS, BaseTrainer, etc.) and a mix of in-person and virtual training for cultural awareness, technical skill development and project management. Some organizations are modernizing after disruptions (one mentioned a crippling 2023 cyberattack), and others use peer-networking or community-based learning for climate/energy coordinators. Interviewees emphasized that classroom modules are useful but relationship-building often happens best face-to-face; several argued for peer learning and practical O&M supports. Consensus is that tools are enablers, not substitutes.

4.14 Governments Should Fund Capacity And Avoid "One-Size" Rollouts

Interviewees wanted governments to fund capacity (not just capital) and to design programs in collaboration with communities rather than imposing generic "solutions" (e.g., roof-mounted solar on poor housing stock). Several argued governments should provide stable funding routed to utilities or communities (not multiple competing middlemen) and enable utility-led implementation where appropriate. Participants also advocated for systemic policy tools: energy sovereignty frameworks (e.g., local Indigenous energy policy), equity pathways for major transmission projects, and grants that support both capital and O&M staffing. The common theme called for coordinated roles (across federal/provincial, utility, and community boundaries) and smarter program design. Recent government moves and reports confirm growing funding streams and policy experiments, but also the call for better coordination (Canada Energy Regulator: 2023).

4.15 Realistic, Co-Owned Systems With Staged Capacity Building

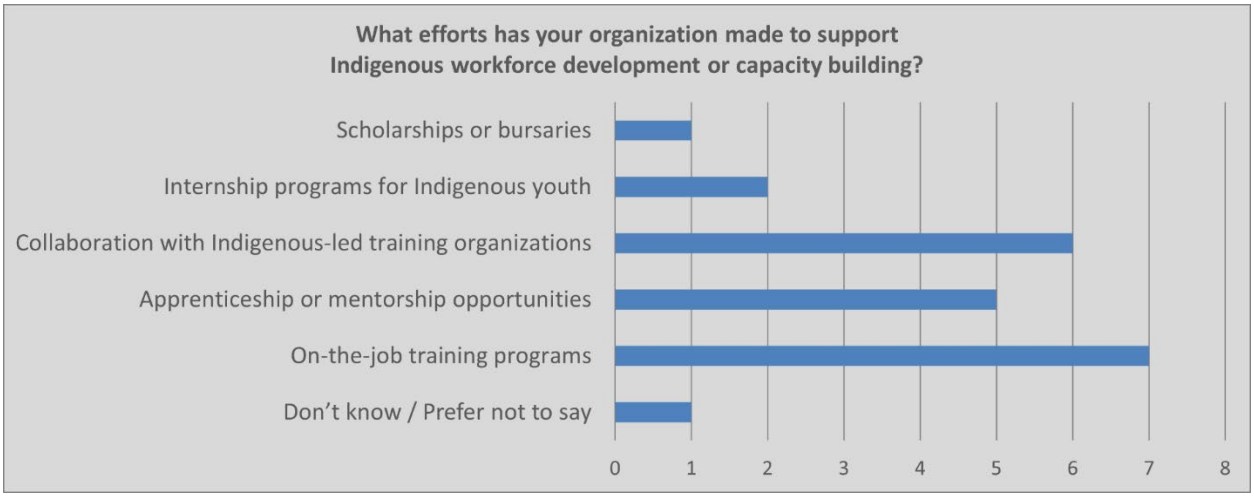
Interviewees imagine an ideal relationship that combines mutual respect, two-way communication, realistic lifecycle expectations for microgrids, and genuine economic reconciliation via co-ownership or PPAs. The recurring prescription: start small with demonstrable wins (billing fixes, outage reliability), then scale to co-ownership and larger projects once trust and capacity are built. Participants repeatedly stressed the importance of honest conversations about technical and economic viability so communities don't get oversold "dreams" that aren't sustainable. Many envisioned interconnected systems where communities can operate autonomously but interconnect with utilities for support and markets (PIB's energy sovereignty idea is a concrete example). Overall, the dominant theme was incremental, realistic partnership. Broader trends — increasing Indigenous equity stakes in big projects and province-level pathways to transmission equity — align with interviewees' vision of co-ownership.

5. SURVEY DATA

An online survey was administered through SurveyMonkey as part of the project's data collection efforts. The survey focused on industry professionals in utilities and clean energy organizations. This section presents a selection of distilled results.

One of the first questions asked was "What specific skills or competencies do you look for when hiring for Indigenous energy projects?" Technical certifications such as those related to electrical, solar, wind, HVAC, and cultural awareness and sensitivity were top joint priorities. One respondent added that

> *"Personal qualities are the most critical: patience, attention to detail, an open mind, desire to learn; everything else can be learned, given suitable opportunities."*

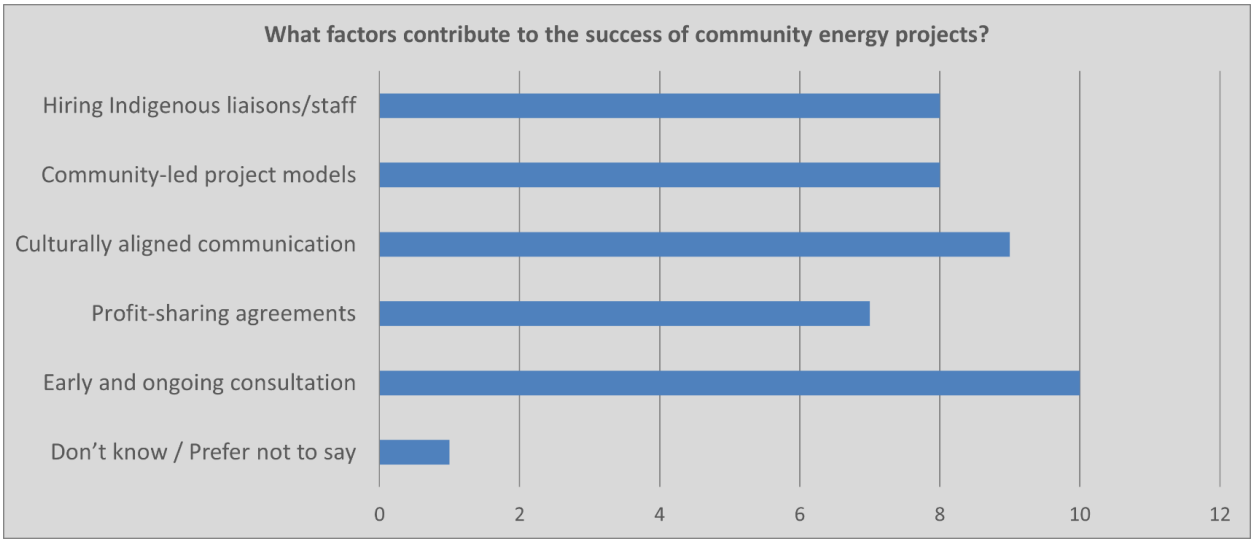


Organizations most frequently support Indigenous workforce development or capacity building through on-the-job training and partnerships with Indigenous-led training organizations, complemented by apprenticeships or mentorships. Respondents had also added other examples such as:

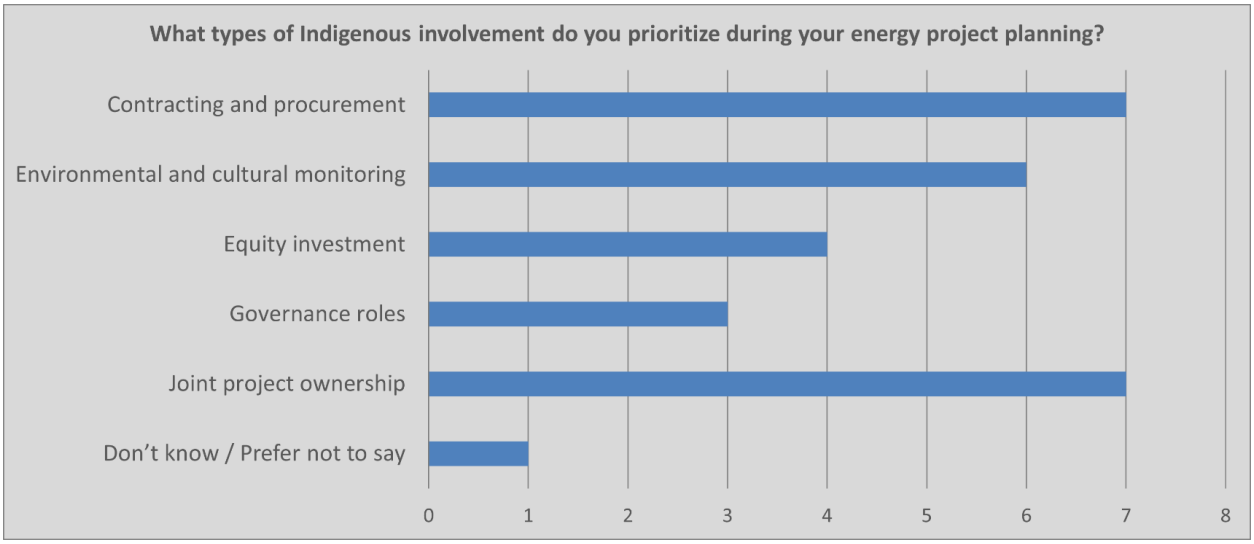
> *"Participation in gatherings, conferences; communications about R&D objectives with Indigenous stakeholders."*

“Priority in selecting Indigenous contractors for low-risk and low-cost projects.”

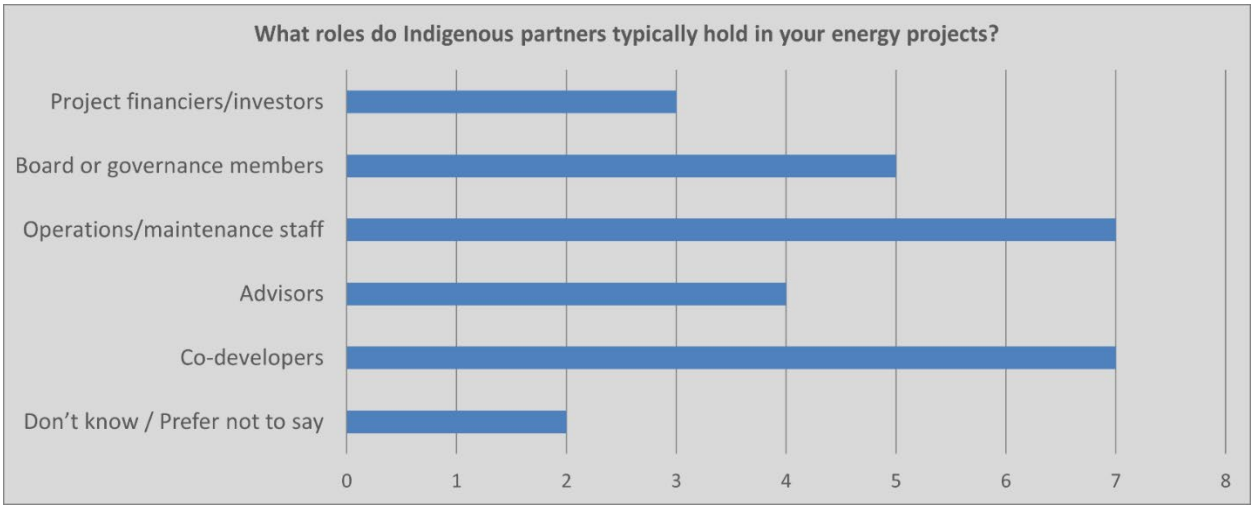
The most significant barrier in developing the skills needed to work effectively with Indigenous communities is competing priorities, followed by constraints in training budgets and lack of partnerships with Indigenous training organizations.



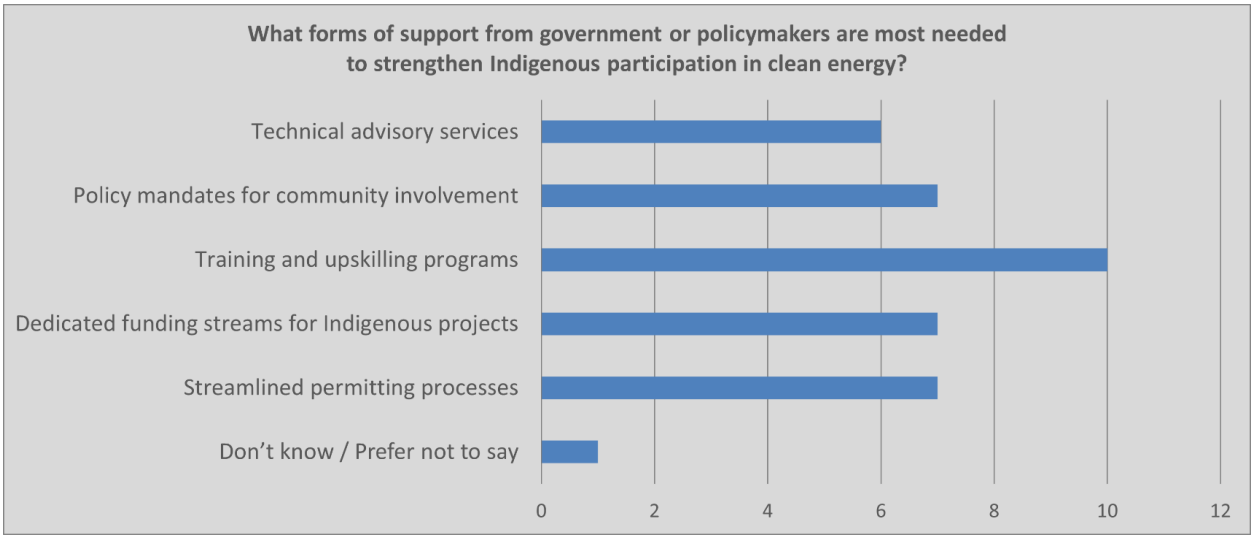
When asked "What factors contribute to the success of community energy projects", it's "all of the above". Success depends on early, continuous engagement and culturally aligned communication, supported by community-led governance models and dedicated Indigenous liaisons/staff. Profit-sharing provides an additional mechanism for alignment and long-term buy-in.



Participants were asked about Indigenous involvement during energy project planning. Organizations most often prioritize shared ownership and contracting/procurement opportunities. In the actual projects, Indigenous partners most frequently serve as co-developers and operations or maintenance staff.



When asked "In your experience, what forms of support from government or policymakers are most needed to strengthen Indigenous participation in clean energy?", respondents prioritized workforce training and upskilling above all.



There were some open-ended questions in the survey. One of them asked "What are some common misconceptions utilities or governments may have when engaging with Indigenous communities on energy projects?"

There was one key theme among the answers which was assuming uniformity:

> *"Treat all Indigenous communities as identical, ignoring unique cultures and protocols"*
>
> *"Assume a one-size-fits-all approach"*
>
> *"Think that "Indigenous Peoples" are a single group with uniform interests"*
>
> *"Assume all communities have the same priorities or governance structures"*

Other misconceptions mentioned includes:

- Undervaluing traditional knowledge: *"Dismiss traditional ecological knowledge in favour of western science"*
- Misunderstanding the technical and operational needs: *"Expect minimal remote technical support to be a substitute for community-based technical expertise"*
- Overemphasizing economic benefits: *"Believe that offering economic benefits alone is sufficient, without addressing cultural, environmental, and historical considerations"*
- Misinterpreting development preferences: *"Mistaken that they don't want development on their lands"*

- Consultation misconceptions: *"See consultation as a procedural step to get approval"* instead of engaging in meaningful and ongoing consultation

Participants were asked for additional comments or insights to improve collaboration between utilities and Indigenous communities.

One respondent provided an excellent list of 27 items. Some of the items mentioned are:

- *Start Early & Stay Consistent*
- *Begin engagement well before project planning*
- *Maintain regular communication, not just during crises*
- *Build relationships outside of specific project needs*
- *Create Dedicated Indigenous Relations Teams*
- *Hire Indigenous staff members*
- ....

Two other insightful responses said:

> *"Collaboration works best when Indigenous communities are treated as rights holders, not just stakeholders — and when utilities, policies, and programs align with principles of reconciliation, self-determination."*

> *"Energy projects should be set up to ensure that technical support and ongoing training are in place after project completion, so that community-based operators and staff can continue to grow with their work."*

6. CONCLUSIONS

The interviews converge into a powerful portrait of an energy landscape undergoing cultural, technical, and political transformation. At the core of these conversations is the recognition that Indigenous communities are no longer peripheral stakeholders—they are co-developers, owners, knowledge holders, and sovereign partners shaping the direction of energy futures. Participants repeatedly emphasized that diesel reduction is only part of the story; the deeper purpose is energy sovereignty—control, security, and the ability to define one's own path. As one interviewee expressed, communities are motivated by "revenue and sovereignty," showing how economic, cultural, and infrastructural goals interweave into a unified aspiration for autonomy. Policies, grants, and shifting public expectations provide needed momentum, but the interviews make clear that genuine, trust-based relationships remain the decisive ingredient.

Across sections, a recurring theme is the slow and human nature of trust-building. Utilities cannot arrive in communities as technical authorities; they must arrive as partners willing to listen. Participants described trust as something that accumulates across years—

through transparency, early engagement, meaningful consultation, and consistent follow-through. Misconceptions on both sides—utilities assuming communities are fully equipped to operate new systems, or communities assuming utilities can indefinitely run community-owned infrastructure—often fracture these relationships. The data suggests that clear communication, culturally grounded engagement, and honest conversations about technical realities are required to overcome these gaps. As another participant warned, even a term like "curtailment" can erode trust if not explained with care.

A major insight across the interviews is that energy projects cannot be disentangled from broader community realities. Housing crises, strained social services, and limited local training infrastructure shape the viability of energy initiatives. This aligns with national reporting that many remote communities prioritize essential needs before technical innovation, and projects succeed only when interwoven with job creation, O&M supports, training, and social benefits. One interviewee highlighted that rooftop solar is sometimes rejected because "basic needs take precedence," underscoring how energy policy must be aligned with lived conditions rather than abstract planning.

The interviews also reveal a profound shift toward Indigenous ownership and entrepreneurship. Procurement levers, PPAs, co-investment models, and equity-sharing arrangements were frequently cited as pathways to meaningful Indigenous participation. Literature echoes this pattern, noting that benefit agreements and revenue streams have enabled Indigenous nations to acquire substantial ownership stakes in major energy assets, a trend reshaping the economic landscape of the sector. Participants repeatedly described these ownership pathways as essential for reconciliation, economic empowerment, and long-term sustainability.

Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) emerged as both a promise and a gap. Interviewees value TEK deeply but admit its use remains reactive—introduced when impacts arise rather than embedded early in planning. This reactive pattern mirrors research showing inconsistent integration of TEK across Canadian energy projects. Participants pointed to powerful examples—storytelling sessions, fish habitat adaptations—but ultimately stressed the need for systematic, proactive inclusion that reflects Indigenous laws, cultural protocols, and relational worldviews.

Internal capacity constraints within utilities—staffing shortages, funding gaps, limited cultural training—were another consistent barrier. Many organizations rely on a few internal champions rather than whole-of-organization frameworks. Interviewees emphasized the importance of internal teams with both soft skills (relationship building, listening, cultural competence) and technical expertise. As one participant noted, cultural competency is "a muscle" requiring continuous exercise, not a checkbox.

Across every section, the vision of an ideal future relationship is built on realism, reciprocity, and co-ownership. Participants imagine energy systems where communities

have autonomy, utilities provide steady partnership, and capacities grow in staged, supportive ways. This vision is not utopian but grounded: start small, demonstrate reliability, build capacity gradually, and scale only when the relationship is ready. The interviews show a future shaped not by grand declarations but by sustained, steady acts of respect and shared responsibility.

Collectively, the themes suggest that the path to respectful energy partnerships requires:

1. long-term relational commitments;
2. capacity and funding structures that empower communities;
3. systematic cultural integration and TEK inclusion;
4. flexible procurement and ownership models that foster true economic participation; and
5. internal utility reforms that build the skills needed for nation-to-nation collaboration.

These interviews offer a hopeful picture—one where reconciliation is not an abstract goal but a daily practice, manifesting in projects, contracts, conversations, and shared stewardship of energy systems.

7. RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Establish long-term, relationship-first engagement frameworks.

Utilities should formalize engagement practices that privilege trust-building over transactional project cycles. Participants emphasized that meaningful relationships "start long before the energy project," suggesting the need for early listening sessions, continuous follow-up, culturally grounded communication, and transparent decision-making. Codifying these practices ensures that trust is not dependent on individual champions but becomes part of institutional DNA. Clear explanation of technical processes—avoiding jargon such as "curtailment" unless contextualized—can further prevent misunderstandings that erode trust.

2. Fund and support community capacity beyond capital projects.

Interviewees consistently pointed out that communities need staffing, training, and operational support, not just new infrastructure. Governments and utilities should therefore invest in grant-writers, O&M teams, local coordinators, and technical trainees. As one respondent noted, rooftop solar sometimes fails because housing conditions or social priorities are higher on the list. Ensuring that energy projects are integrated with broader community needs—employment, housing, health, education—will increase adoption, strengthen outcomes, and reduce project failures.

3. Build internal utility capacity through cultural competency and cross-functional training.

Utilities should invest in mandatory cultural training, TEK integration modules, and relationship-building curricula for engineers, planners, and project managers. Participants described cultural competency as a “muscle” requiring ongoing practice, not one-off workshops. Formalizing internal Indigenous strategies, strengthening Indigenous Relations teams, and ensuring parity with technical departments will help shift responsibility from a few champions to a whole organization.

4. Expand Indigenous ownership pathways through procurement, PPAs, and equity opportunities.

Respondents strongly support mechanisms that create real Indigenous economic participation. Utilities should increase the use of procurement weighting for Indigenous firms, targeted sole-sourcing, local content rules, and structured pathways for equity investment. Federal and provincial governments should complement this by designing programs that support both capital and ongoing costs. As one article noted, “significant payments…enabled Indigenous groups to…acquire equity interests in energy assets,” showing what becomes possible when revenue and ownership are built into project design.

5. Create formal, proactive structures for TEK inclusion.

Rather than relying on reactive adjustments—as is currently common—utilities should embed TEK into early-stage planning. This means involving Elders and knowledge holders during site selection, feasibility studies, environmental reviews, and operational protocols. Practical tools could include TEK-informed design standards, joint monitoring committees, cultural landscape mapping, and elder advisory panels. Early TEK integration will support ecological stewardship and strengthen community trust.

6. Strengthen collaboration with Indigenous training institutions and networks.

Given the limited training infrastructure described in the interviews, utilities should work to co-develop programs with regional colleges, Indigenous power authorities, and training centres. Joint curricula on microgrid O&M, energy planning, and technical trades can close skill gaps and create meaningful career pathways. Such partnerships also reinforce the broader goals of sovereignty and community-led development.

7. Prioritize realistic, staged project development that aligns with community readiness.

The interviews describe an ideal energy relationship as incremental: begin with manageable improvements (billing issues, reliability enhancements), then progress to co-ownership, PPAs, or larger-scale projects. Utilities should adopt staged project models that respect community choice, pace, and capacity. This avoids overselling technologies that may not be sustainable and ensures communities have time to grow into long-term ownership or operational roles.

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