



**Future
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Project Insights Report

Competitiveness of Critical Mining in the North



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Canadian Climate
Institute



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Executive Summary

Critical minerals are foundational to many of Canada's economic priorities, with estimates that they have the potential to contribute substantially to GDP growth. However, most of these resources are located on the traditional territories of Indigenous peoples, where historical failures in consultation, consent, and benefit-sharing have led to conflict, mistrust, and legal challenges. Indigenous nations also remain underrepresented in the mining sector and face persistent barriers to capital and capacity, limiting their ability to participate equitably and benefit from development on their lands.

This research project examined how Canada can advance critical mineral development while respecting Indigenous rights, values, and self-determination. Using expert interviews and a case study with the Cree Nation of Eeyou Istchee, the study identified key enablers and barriers to equitable participation for Indigenous nations.

The findings show that equitable Indigenous participation depends on four interconnected pillars: capital, capacity, governance, and consent. Strengthening these pillars enables Indigenous nations to move from reactive roles to proactive leaders in critical mineral projects. The Eeyou Istchee case study demonstrates how strong governance frameworks and consent-based approaches support meaningful engagement and long-term success of projects.

Ultimately, centring Indigenous leadership and partnerships is essential to building a sustainable, inclusive, and resilient critical minerals sector in Canada. One that centres reconciliation and is grounded in trust, shared prosperity, and nation-to-nation partnerships.

KEY INSIGHTS

- 1 Without access to capital and capacity, Indigenous nations remain locked out of leading or owning critical mineral projects on their own lands.
- 2 Equitable participation in critical mineral development depends on strengthening Indigenous governance structures and respecting Free, Prior and Informed Consent as an ongoing relationship, not a one-time approval.

The Issue

Critical minerals, such as nickel, lithium, copper, graphite, and rare earth elements, are essential to facilitate the clean energy transition and build renewable energy technologies. In 2024, it was estimated that critical mineral projects could potentially contribute as much as \$500 billion over their lifespan to Canada's GDP. In Canada, these critical minerals are overwhelmingly found on the traditional and legal territories of Indigenous peoples. Historically, the mining industry has struggled with poor consultation and consent practices with these communities, leading to conflict and legal challenges of development projects involving Indigenous nations.

Indigenous people continue to be underrepresented in the mining industry and have limited access to capital. This makes it difficult for Indigenous nations to meaningfully and equitably participate in and benefit from critical mineral development projects on their own lands.

For many Indigenous nations and communities, these minerals are not just resources and economic assets. They are deeply connected to their land, culture, and identity. Continuing to extract these minerals without respect for the land and culture is harmful to Indigenous nations and creates deep mistrust.

This raises the question: How can Canada develop its critical minerals resources to support the clean energy transition while respecting Indigenous rights, values, interests, and lands?



What We Investigated

This project sought to identify the enablers and barriers to equitable participation of Indigenous nations in Canada's growing critical minerals sector.

This qualitative research combined a literature review with nine semi-structured expert interviews and a place-based case study.

- **Literature review:** The literature review was conducted to identify previous research on Indigenous participation in mining and critical minerals projects.
- **Expert interviews:** Nine interviews were conducted with individuals who had worked in mining and critical mineral development projects with Indigenous communities. They included government officials, consultants, legal and other advisors, and representatives from Indigenous development corporations and community organizations.
- **Case study:** To provide a deeper perspective, a case study was conducted with the Cree Nation of Eyou Istchee. Through four interviews with community members, it highlighted the lived experiences, concerns and opportunities when a Nation is engaged with mining development on their lands.

The interview data was transcribed and analyzed using thematic coding, and insights were organized by the following key themes: opportunities, barriers, perception of consent, and recommendations for improving equitable participation.

✔ What We're Learning

There are four pillars necessary for equitable participation

The research findings show that equitable participation of Indigenous nations in Canada's critical minerals sector depends on capital, capacity, governance and consent. Strengthening these four pillars would enable Indigenous nations to build partnerships and lead work in critical mining.

Capital

Capital provides the necessary financial resources for Indigenous nations to invest in projects, create businesses and pursue long-term opportunities related to critical mineral developments on their own terms. It may also include equity, ownership, revenue-sharing, royalties, loans or flexible funding streams. Access to capital remains a key barrier, as many nations are unable to invest in projects or take financial control, particularly smaller nations. Without access to capital, nations are unable to truly own and manage projects.

Capacity

Capacity grows from the investment, skill-building, knowledge and institutions required to fully participate in and shape the development of critical mining projects. To be successful, capacity building needs to expand beyond training for entry-level jobs and provide the skill-building and resources to Nations to lead critical mineral projects. These could include place-based, culturally grounded education, mentorships, leadership development and the establishment of Indigenous-led institutions to manage projects. There are both individual and systemic barriers to capacity building for Indigenous leaders to engage in critical mining projects.

Governance

Governance structures enable nations to design and enforce their own decision-making processes, and manage benefits while safeguarding their nation's priorities during critical mining projects. Ensuring strong governance structures exist within nations and are recognized across all jurisdictions is critical for making and enforcing decisions for projects and for equitable participation. When governance structures are weak, there are higher risks and fewer opportunities for Nations to be successful with critical mining projects.

Consent

Consent ensures that decisions to approve or reject projects are informed, legitimate and based on Indigenous rights and self-determination. Free, Prior and Informed Consent must be respected and used in alignment with Indigenous values across Indigenous nations. Consent must be viewed as a continuous building of a trust-based relationship rather than a necessary checkbox. As well, projects should not go forward if the impacts are unacceptable to Indigenous lands, people, and resources. Ensuring that consent is addressed will ensure that projects can move forward with less conflict, greater legitimacy from nations and improved long-term outcomes.

The case study of the Eeyou Istchee Cree Nation highlights that strong governance frameworks allow for Indigenous nations to move from being reactive participants to leaders in shaping mining projects. There are several governance frameworks that act as a blueprint of meaningful engagement, consent and benefit-sharing from Indigenous nations that centre Indigenous knowledge, law and authority. These include the James Bay and Northern Quebec Agreement and the Cree Nation Mining Policy.

Overall, while challenges remain, there is enormous potential for Indigenous leadership and decision-making within critical mining projects. However, systematic change is needed to enable access to capital and increased capacity. In addition, strong governance structures and an understanding of Free, Prior and Informed Consent must be in place to ensure Indigenous nations can engage with mining projects if and when they wish.

★ Why It Matters

To grow and sustain the critical mining sector in Canada, it is essential to actively work with Indigenous nations and leaders. When governments fail to meaningfully engage with Indigenous leaders from the start, it can lead to conflict and broken trust, with delayed development projects wasting valuable time, money and resources. Policymakers and industry leaders must ensure that development projects do not deepen existing mistrust and inequalities.

To support reconciliation, critical mining projects cannot come at the cost of Indigenous lands, rights or well-being. The government must balance economic opportunity with the impact on Indigenous nations. As planning for development projects is underway, industry leaders need to understand the impact mining activities will have on the land, how much the land can sustain, and who benefits from these activities. Rushing into projects focused only on the economic output reinforces colonial narratives and undermines Indigenous sovereignty.

Canada has the opportunity to reshape the critical mining sector by centring Indigenous voices in decision-making. Partnerships with Indigenous nations can lead to development projects that experience fewer delays and legal challenges. These partnerships also support increased benefits to Indigenous nations, companies, and Canada as a whole. This will help Canada build a stronger and more sustainable sector built on trust, shared prosperity and true nation-to-nation partnership.



State of Skills: Supporting Indigenous and Northern Entrepreneurship and SMEs

Indigenous and Northern entrepreneurship and businesses play a crucial role in bolstering local economies by supporting economic diversification, job creation and community development.

[Read Thematic Report](#)

Have questions about our work? Do you need access to a report in English or French? Please contact communications@fsc-ccf.ca.

How to Cite This Report

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The Future Skills Centre acknowledges that the Anishinaabe, Mississaugas and Haudenosaunee share a special relationship to the 'Dish With One Spoon Territory,' where our office is located, bound to share and protect the land. As a pan-Canadian initiative, FSC operates on the traditional territory of many Indigenous nations across Turtle Island, the name given to the North American continent by some Indigenous peoples. We are grateful for the opportunity to work in this territory and commit ourselves to learning about our shared history and doing our part towards reconciliation.

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