

# SUPPORTING INDIGENOUS INNOVATION: THE CASE OF THE FIRST PEOPLE'S INNOVATION CENTRE

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*This publication is part of a series of case studies that illustrate different ideas to inspire changemakers involved in community development in the Quebec context.*

Our First Peoples have a unique, invaluable approach to innovation that deserves to be recognized and celebrated. In this era of reconciliation and decolonization, how can we promote Indigenous innovation and recognize its distinctive features? How can we support Indigenous innovators to enter the job market and make their mark? Let's take a look at what the First People's Innovation Center has to offer.

## BACKGROUND

Present on Turtle Island since Palaeolithic times, the First Peoples are champions of innovation, as demonstrated by their ability to adapt to their environment and overcome the numerous challenges they have encountered from past to present. Shaped by the history, culture, knowledge, and traditions of the First Peoples, Indigenous innovation is unique. It is also particularly valuable, as a way to express pride in their identity, and of championing their knowledge through developing their own solutions to their problems and responses to their needs.



### INDIGENOUS INNOVATION

A self-determination approach in which First Peoples use their creativity, knowledge, culture and traditions to develop effective solutions that are appropriate to their context. These solutions not only allow them to overcome various obstacles, improve their living conditions and assert their pride in their identity; They also have the potential to make society fairer and more equitable, and to bring Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples closer together.

Indigenous innovation also benefits non-Indigenous people. For example, consider Indigenous techniques for controlling forest fires. These techniques are a testament to the First People's capacity for innovation and are now attracting renewed interest as a result of climate change.

For Indigenous communities to fully develop their innovative potential, it is essential to create a space where their rights, knowledge, traditions, and modes of governance are respected and valued. Moreover, it is crucial that the innovation process promotes their empowerment and recognition and generates solutions that are culturally appropriate and adapted to their contexts. Moreover, Indigenous innovators must have access to the latest techniques and tools if they are to take their rightful place in the job market.

### **THE FIRST PEOPLE'S INNOVATION CENTRE: BUILDING CROSS-CULTURAL BRIDGES BY PROMOTING INDIGENOUS INNOVATION**

The [First Peoples Innovation Centre](#) (FPIC) is one of the organizations dedicated to promoting Indigenous innovation in Quebec. Its mission is to stimulate and support social and technological innovation in Indigenous contexts. The organization's vision is to be recognized as a leading reference in this field. The FNICs approach is rooted in values such as innovation, cultural pride, and socio-cultural diversity, and, as Viviane Michel, Director of Relations with First Nations and Inuit, points out, "young people are really important, and hold a very special place in our work."

The FPIC's primary objective is to promote and unlock the full potential of First Peoples. To this end, the organization works with Indigenous communities, as well as with individuals and organizations, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous, who wish to improve conditions for Indigenous people living in urban areas or communities. The FPIC offers a [range of culturally adapted projects and activities](#) (e.g., Indigenous cooking program, intergenerational sharing initiatives, Onaki Circle) designed to promote Indigenous traditions and knowledge. "In particular, these programs enable Indigenous youth living in urban areas who are not in contact with their communities to learn about with their own culture and recharge their batteries," explains Euloge Placca, Director of Corporate Services at the FNIC.



The FPIC – By the numbers:

More than **50** partners, more than **30** volunteers and a **hundred** employees engaged in the implementation of around **fifteen** programs involving **590** participants and reaching **2,050** young people.



Source: FPIC

The FPIC's second objective is to stimulate social and technological innovation among Indigenous people. Considering the barriers they face in accessing employment, the intention is to equip and encourage them to complete their studies, find a job, or start a business. To achieve this goal, FPIC has set up several [digital fabrication laboratories, or fablabs](#). A fablab is an informal, cooperative space where participants have access to expertise, mentoring, cutting-edge technological tools, and materials, enabling

them to invent and produce a variety of objects. By experimenting and creating in a safe and culturally appropriate environment, Indigenous people have the opportunity to learn about digital fabrication and develop skills in technological innovation.

For example, [FabLab Onaki](#) ("onaki" means "roots" in the Anishinaabe language), Canada's very first Indigenous fablab, offers youth a 20-week paid training program that helps them acquire the skills and knowledge they need to use digital tools (e.g. 3D printers, laser cutters, digital embroiderers) to make products that reflect their culture and traditions. As Mr. Placca explains: "When a young person who has no hope and no expectations in life discovers [the fablab], they realize that they have talent, potential, and decide to take charge of their life [...] They are then very proud to return home to show what they have learned in their training. That's where you see the success of the [fablab], what it can offer our youth. Suddenly, it changes the course of their lives. In fact, quite a few young people who have taken our training courses have gone on to set up their own businesses."

The FPIC's third objection is to bring Indigenous and non-Indigenous groups closer together. It offers a [range of activities](#), such as workshops and National Indigenous Peoples Day, to raise awareness among non-Indigenous people of Indigenous realities, traditions, and ways of knowing and being. This helps to build bridges between these two groups, with a view towards genuine and lasting reconciliation. In addition, the fact that the FPIC advocates socio-cultural diversity and encourages the involvement of non-Indigenous people in its work also contributes to reconciliation.

## CONCLUSION

As stated in their Values Statement, the FPIC's approach is characterized by the desire to promote a process of innovation led by and for First Peoples. However, the FPIC adds a third dimension to methodology: with the First Peoples. People of all backgrounds who wish to contribute to Indigenous social transformations are invited to collaborate and learn more about the different facets of Indigenous realities.

By focusing on these three dimensions - by, for and with Indigenous people - the FPIC uses Indigenous innovation first and foremost to rekindle pride for their Indigenous identity among their youth and help them secure a better future. According to Mr. Placca: “Part of what makes the FPIC so special is that we've chosen to work with marginalized [Aboriginal] youth, and we're committed to their future. We're here to help them, to bring about change, and provide the support they need to enter the 21st century job market, because they have a lot to give.” In fact, a number of the young people who took part in the Onaki FabLab are now employed as Assistant Instructors at the FPIC. Indigenous populations have endured a painful journey, but the organization is optimistic about its approach, seeking to instill hope in these young people and encourage them to value their roots. “We're not going to revisit traumas with the youth,” insists Ms. Michel. “No, we're going to focus on [Indigenous] values, customs, and traditions.”

Another feature of the FPIC is using Indigenous innovation as a vector for healing and restoring intercultural links from a perspective of coming together and sharing. The FPIC is convinced that opening up to others - to non-Indigenous people - enriches this work and can contribute to lasting and genuine reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples.

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“What makes the FPIC special is that it works in consultation with Indigenous and non-Indigenous people. You don't categorize the people you work with. There is diversity.”

– *Viviane Michel, Director of First Nations and Inuit Relations at FPIC*

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