

# Racial inequities in rural, remote, and northern Canadian planning

By Jonathan Boron, Katherine Levett, and Myfannwy Pope

## Summary

This reflection outlines the ways in which planning has and continues to fail Indigenous and Black rural communities across Canada. In this article we briefly document the legacies and impacts of systemic racism within the planning of major infrastructure and resource exploitation sectors on rural, northern, and remote communities in Canada. Specifically, we discuss environmental impact assessment and consultation processes, drawing from examples to reflect on resultant disparities in health, economic outcomes, and climate change impacts between urban and rural communities. We provide recommendations that may help to foster truly equity-based planning in environmentally-sensitive and resource-rich rural regions within Canada.

## Sommaire

Cette réflexion décrit les façons dont la planification a laissé et continue de laisser de côté les communautés rurales autochtones et noires du Canada. Dans cet article, nous documentons brièvement les héritages et les impacts du racisme systémique dans la planification des grandes infrastructures et des secteurs d'exploitation des ressources, sur les communautés rurales, nordiques et éloignées du Canada. Plus précisément, nous abordons les processus d'évaluation et de consultation des impacts environnementaux, en nous appuyant sur des exemples, pour réfléchir aux disparités qui en résultent en matière de santé, de résultats économiques et d'impacts du changement climatique, sur les communautés urbaines et rurales. Nous fournissons des recommandations pouvant aider à favoriser un urbanisme véritablement fondé sur l'équité dans les régions rurales, en matière d'environnement et de ressources au Canada.

## Structures of anti-Indigenous and anti-Black Racism in Canada

The year 2020 brought systemic racism and inequity into mainstream planning discourse. As researchers in resource and environmental planning, we see this as an opportunity to reflect on and examine the procedural inequities and racism within the fields of rural resource planning. Canada is founded on an ongoing structure of settler colonialism, which aims to erase Indigenous identities to secure access to territory on which Indigenous nations have sovereign claims.<sup>1</sup> This process is evidenced by a series of assimilation and genocide efforts, including residential schools and the outlawing of Potlaches and other political and spiritual practices.

Slavery was practiced in Canada from the 1600s into the early 1800s.<sup>2</sup> The social, political, and economic oppression from slavery embedded anti-Black racism into Canadian institutions and society, which works to disempower and bring violence on Black communities and individuals.

Slavery and settler colonialism particularly underpin ongoing inequities among Indigenous and Black communities in rural areas. Black and Indigenous peoples have historically and presently defied the notion that rural Canada is white, along with numerous racialized communities often considered solely urban, including Japanese, Chinese, and Sikh communities.

In this article we briefly document the legacies and impacts of systemic racism within the planning of major infrastructure and resource exploitation sectors on

rural, northern, and remote communities in Canada. We then turn our attention to recommendations that may help to foster truly equity-based planning<sup>i</sup> in environmentally-sensitive and resource-rich rural regions within Canada. Throughout this article we provide references to case examples of racism in resource planning. While our examples primarily focus on Indigenous and Black communities, we emphasize that the processes described in this article and other rural planning practices impact a diversity of rural and remote racialized communities.

Path dependence and institutional memory of white supremacy and settler colonialism in our political and social systems is at the root of procedural injustice in the environmental assessment process, including infrastructure siting and resource exploitation that undermine socially just and equity-based planning in rural and remote communities.<sup>3</sup> Procedural injustice includes a lack of treaty-right recognition in major project development and colour-blind processes of impact assessment.<sup>4</sup> Impact assessment rarely recognizes cumulative effects of development and fails to capture the full holistic impact on the lands, water, and communities affected.<sup>5</sup> Such exclusionary engagement processes maintain disregard for Indigenous and Black communities' abilities to consent to harmful development in their communities (**Figures 1 and 4**).

Dispossession of land represents the key mechanism of settler colonialism and a fundamental legacy of slavery. Land is necessary for survival through spiritual, economic, and social means. Canada's founding, including the myth of *Terra Nullius* (empty land) and the development of the Indian Act and reserve system underlie ongoing dispossession through regional infrastructure and resource development that increasingly contribute to settler-created climate change impacts.<sup>6</sup> The inability of enslaved people to own land, reneged promises of decent land to Black loyalists, and discriminatory zoning and ownership laws against Black individuals fed the segregation of Black and white communities.<sup>7</sup> Segregation has allowed the development of white communities at the expense of Black ones,

### Figure 1. Lincolnville, Guysborough County, Nova Scotia Landfills

Lincolnville is a small African Nova Scotian rural community that was settled by Black loyalists in 1784. A first-generation landfill was opened a kilometer away from the community in 1974, despite protests. In 2006, the Municipality of the District of Guysborough closed the first landfill and opened a second-generation landfill. Residents assert the municipality failed to properly consult, ignored and denied attempts by residents to organize and present views, and neglected issues of race.



Unist'ot'en Protest, Vancouver. Source: Jonathan Boron.

including the siting of a mega waste treatment plant in Lincolnville, Nova Scotia (**Figure 1**).

Undeniably, we see racism in planning and policies in urban spaces, as evidenced by exclusionary zoning, land use, law enforcement, surveillance, and data collection processes.<sup>8</sup> Insidious acts of structural racism in rural planning appear in the historic and ongoing disparities, and social and environmental impacts associated with land use for resource extraction and development in rural regions (**Figures 1, 3 and 4**). This results in the suppression of rights of Indigenous peoples defending their land and the history of Black and other communities of colour advocating for the right to land.

### Rural-Urban Disparity

Urban centres in Canada benefit from the displacement, as a tactic of exploitation, of Black, Indigenous, and racialized communities in rural areas. Natural

resources account for 16.9% of Canada's GDP and generate \$21.4 billion a year in government revenues. In 2019, natural resources including energy, minerals and metals, and forestry accounted directly and indirectly for 1.9 million jobs.<sup>9</sup> Much of the benefit of these jobs and the revenues generated flow directly to urban communities in the form of the resulting goods and services along with the management, investment, and logistics jobs related to these industries. At the same time, urban communities benefit from hydropower, oil and gas, mining, and waste disposal taking place outside of their communities. These decisions about land use and resource management create an illusion for urban communities that hides the impacts on rural communities. By design, the Site C dam in British Columbia, the Lincolnville Landfill in Nova Scotia, the Giant Mine site in the Northwest Territories, housing development in Six

i According to the American Planning Association, "Planning for equity is intended to challenge those planning practices that result in policies, programs, and regulations that disproportionately impact and stymie the progress of certain segments of the population more than others."

**Figure 2. Six Nations of the Grand River territory, Ontario – 1492 Landback Lane**

Land reclamation by the Haudenosaunee of Six Nations to stop housing developments on land that has been a part of a specific land claim since 1989. The Haldimand Accord sets aside the title of land on six miles of either side of the Grand River for the Kanien'kehá:ka and other Haudenosaunee. The federal government refuses to settle these specific claims, and developers continue to try to build on this territory without proper consultation of the Six Nations community.

**Figure 3. Dene First Nation Traditional Territory; Yellowknife, Northwest Territories – Giant Mine Site- Arsenic Deposit**

During the operation of the Giant Mine from 1948 to 2004, arsenic poisoning as a result of gold extraction methods caused First Nation members of the Wiliideh Yellowknives Dene First Nation to get sick, impeded on their ability to exercise treaty rights to hunt and fish, and caused the death of a Dene toddler from eating snow in 1951. Today, the soil around the Giant Mine site has tested at nearly three times the arsenic safe exposure limit.



W.A.C. Bennett Dam, Peace River. Source: Jonathan Boron.

Nations territory in Ontario, and fracking in British Columbia have or will benefit urban communities across the country, while protestors and land defenders have been and continue to be criminalized.

**Health Disparities**

Land use policy has and continues to fail Indigenous, Black, and other racialized communities across Canada which has resulted in increasing health disparities. Indigenous, Black, and other racialized communities have been exposed to noxious land uses and infrastructure for the good of Canada's economy (Figures 3 and 4). While Environmental Assessment (EA) proponents, who in many cases are planners, are required to consult with Indigenous communities, often we see that these consultations are inadequate even if they

meet legislative requirements (Figures 1, 2, 3 and 4). Further, as in the case of natural gas development within Treaty 8 (Figure 4), environmental impact assessment processes do not address cumulative impacts or impacts resulting from hundreds of small-scale developments that are outside EA triggering thresholds. Further, the absence of any landscape-scale planning and management to monitor and mitigate overall cumulative impacts from resource development results in widespread habitat fragmentation, ecological degradation, and unknown impacts on hydrological systems – all of which impact ecological and social resilience of rural and Indigenous communities.

Decisions on land use, lack of adequate or any consultation with those affected, and extraction and exploitation of resources

have created systemic inequities that includes the slow violence of environmental contamination, evidenced by arsenic poisoning in Giant Mine site (Figure 3). Indigenous communities across Canada have had boil water advisories in place for generations, while health experts have documented cancer clusters in many Indigenous communities.<sup>10</sup> Importantly, the social impacts of land and resource decisions have had and continue to have detrimental effects, as evidenced by the loss of sacred and cultural sites with historic significance, a decline in population, and increasing violence against Indigenous people, especially women and girls, which have been exacerbated by proximity to remote work camps.<sup>11</sup>

Many rural, northern, remote, and Indigenous communities are also on the frontlines of climate change and are experiencing increased vulnerability due to climate change's associated impacts. Coastal communities are vulnerable to the impacts of sea level rise, while all Indigenous communities are affected by the rapid decline in biodiversity and species abundance which threatens food security, subsistence living, cultural practices, and livelihoods. Further, rural and northern communities are often under-resourced in their ability to address these challenges due to provincial and federal economic priorities, as discussed under the urban-rural disparities section of this article.<sup>12</sup>

**Recommendations**

Current environmental and resource planning processes in Canada maintain systems of oppression and inequality that planners can address. We provide several recommendations on how planning professionals can personally, and within their organizations, practice equity-based environmental and resource planning in rural communities:

**1. Commit to reconciliatory action and recognize Indigenous consent**

Land acknowledgements that are not attached to action hold no meaning. Advocate for 'colonial audits'<sup>13</sup> within your organisation and commit to truth recognition. This requires meaningful consultation that is consent-based, even if there are competing or non-existent jurisdictional requirements. Indigenous

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peoples must be consulted early on and throughout these processes, provided space to voice their concerns and most importantly, be a part of the decision-making process. This also requires recognition of Indigenous jurisdiction and decision-making processes. In many cases a lack of senior government action on land and resource policy has created much conflict for municipalities. Develop strategies for de-escalation, negotiation, and solidarity to push senior governments to honour their responsibilities.

## 2. Plan for cumulative effects, climate impacts, and community resilience

Across many jurisdictions, cumulative effects assessments are under-utilized and lack climate impact consideration. Social diversity is an important aspect of socio-ecological resilience, however state-based impact assessments inadequately consider or recognize alternative and specifically Indigenous values and views within decision-making frameworks that may consider more holistic interrelation of the impact of development decisions.<sup>14</sup> Further, consideration of both intra- and inter-generational equity factors improve the long-term resilience of planning decisions for rural communities. Are the decisions we make today good decisions for our community generations into the future? Climate change impact forecasting should be an important factor in project decisions.



Site C Dam, Treaty 8 Territory. Source: Jonathan Boron.

### Figure 4. Treaty 8 Territory, British Columbia – Natural gas drilling and fracking operations

Increased fracking for liquefied natural gas in northeast BC has resulted in unauthorized dams, substantial increases in water use, and dangerous contamination in water supply as First Nations have no control over industry activity, despite their inherent and treaty rights.

### Figure 5. Site C Dam

A 1,100-megawatt hydro dam currently under construction on the Peace River in northeastern British Columbia. Proposed in the 1970s, the project has faced many court challenges from First Nations who oppose flooding 128 km of the Peace River, putting burial grounds, traditional hunting and fishing areas and habitat for vulnerable species under 50 m of water.



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### 3. Ensure that policies, plans, and programs represent the community you're planning for.

Review your organization's current policies with a critical lens. Are marginalized perspectives centred or erased? How have you prioritized marginalized voices in your consultation process? Do your decisions incorporate an analysis of intergenerational inequities? How are you ensuring the maintenance or improvement of the environmental health of communities while addressing climate concerns?

### 4. Integrate an equity dimension into policy decisions.

Linked to the second recommendation, we need to interrogate the impacts of our future policy and planning decisions. Your evaluation and assessment frameworks should consider equity questions such as: Who benefits from this? Who is disadvantaged by it? How does this impact specific communities or community members? Incorporating an equity dimension in your decision-making processes should include the use of race-based statistics that can inform how various institutional policies impact Indigenous, Black, and other racialized communities. It also requires a meaningful sharing of wealth derived from development through revenue-sharing or community benefit agreements. Further, community employment provisions are already commonplace in benefit agreements, but this often equates to lower skill, lower wage positions. These provisions should promote Indigenous or community employment at higher levels of project management and decision-making.

### 5. Personal learning, self-reflection, and change through praxis.

The planning profession is faced with an opportunity to centre racial and environmental justice in planning and while we advocate for this change on an institutional and legislative level, it must also be embodied by practitioners within these institutions. In order to make informed planning decisions we need to learn about the historical relationships to the land, resources and people we're planning for. We need to ask ourselves how we came to be in this place? Who was here before us and how did they relate to this place? Who else is here and how do we relate to them? By recognizing your own positionality in relation to others, you can begin to decentre

settler-colonial knowledge and create space for multi-perspective decision-making. Finally, we must bring increased awareness and attention to environmental racism in Canada. We have to talk about it, acknowledge its existence, and understand that inaction maintains these structures of oppression.

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We would like to acknowledge and thank the Community Planning and Development Lab in the School of Resource and Environmental Management for their feedback and input on this article.

#### Endnotes

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