



Reflections on diplomacy and the pernicious challenges posed by colonialism

By Victoria Emanuelle Forest Briand

The climate crisis is one of the greatest challenges of the 21st century. As things stand, we are on course for a much warmer world. Cooperation between groups, communities, and countries is often placed at the forefront of climate action. Yet, dialogue, negotiation, and agreements are usually fraught with inequalities.

This piece summarizes and reflects on the discussion organised by the Oxford Department of International Development on 9 November 2021 entitled ‘Climate Diplomacy: Indigenous voices on Negotiating Climate Action’¹. Interested in viewing the event, [click here](#).

This webinar takes a personal look at the power dynamics involved in climate negotiations between Indigenous nations and Canada.

Professor Deborah McGregor, youth activist Beze Gray, and artists and lawyer Terri-Lynn Williams-Davidsons join us to explore the concept of climate diplomacy and look into its applicability in the Canadian context. They discuss how climate negotiations work and what needs to be done to ensure effective cross-cultural dialogue and diplomacy in domestic and international settings. They reflect on how we can better support, preserve, and value Indigenous Knowledge, laws, and cosmologies within domestic and international locations.

Understanding Climate Diplomacy

There exist no universal definitions of climate diplomacy.

According to the European Commission's 2018 Council conclusions, climate diplomacy "encompasses the use of diplomatic tools to support the ambition and functioning of the

¹ *This blog recognizes, acknowledges and honors the original inhabitants of Canada. Canada is located on traditional and unceded lands of the First Nations, Inuit and Métis. Colonial violence continues to negatively impact Indigenous people. Despite the virtual nature of this webinar, it is important to recognize the University of Oxford's colonial past and present. At the Oxford Department of International Development, we hope to continuously lessen ongoing colonial harms through speaking them, improving our professions practices, and to further reflect on our positionality.*

international climate change regime and to attenuate the negative effects climate change risks pose for peace, stability, and prosperity."

It entails a commitment to multilateralism, especially in implementing international agreements and foreign policy objectives. Finally, it calls for preparing "appropriate risk assessment and risk management strategies at a global strategic level" (ibid).

This webinar refers to climate diplomacy as the cross-cultural dialogue and negotiation around environmental policies between individuals, groups, communities, nations, and states.

The underlying belief is that dialogue amongst cultural communities can strengthen innovative and diverse environmental problem-solving. International environmental diplomacy, bilateral climate cooperation, and environmental policy can also promote exchange and confidence-building, thereby contributing to regional stability.

Over the last twenty years, there has been an increasing push to integrate Indigenous groups into global environmental diplomatic events, conferences, and policy papers. Indigenous groups are notably amongst the most vulnerable segment of the population towards climate change.

In her latest blog (2021), McGregor reminds us that the "role of Indigenous peoples in determining future climate policies consists not only of how climate change affects their livelihoods and survival." Indigenous peoples worldwide "play an important role in climate assessment, mitigation, adaptation, and governance." They can advance "transformative and innovative solutions that account for all life."

An International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs (IWGIA) and International Labour Organization joint report noted in 2021 that Indigenous peoples protected about 22% of the planet's surface and 80% of biodiversity.

However, for the Anishinabe professor Deborah McGregor, climate change discourse, advocacy and diplomacy is permeated by injustices. They retain an implicit bias towards a Western agenda and frame of nation-states and human-nature relations.

"We don't really use the term 'climate diplomacy' in Canada," says Deborah McGregor.

"Indigenous nations aren't recognized as being societies and nations," she explains, "We are not included in these diplomatic conversations even if we might have them with each other (Indigenous nations) through our own treaties and agreements."

This exclusion pushes Indigenous groups into the realm of advocacy and activism. "We remain on the outside looking-in," admits McGregor.

Climate diplomacy often fails to acknowledge history - the causes of climate change - and identifying the origins of unjust realities.

Thus, to achieve a climate plan driven by human well-being, equity, justice, diplomatic spaces and relations must release themselves from current power structures such as colonialism. As this webinar reveals, we must gear efforts towards sustaining Indigenous sovereignty, diplomatic powers, and cultures and expanding conceptions of climate diplomacy.

An Unequal Playing Field

Still to this day, pipelines and extractive projects are constructed on Indigenous land without accommodation or free, prior, and informed consent by Indigenous groups, notes lawyer Terri-Lynn Williams-Davidson.

Environmental negotiations remain embedded in unequal and historically based power structures like colonialism.

For Beze Gray, a two-spirit water protector and land defender, the control and management of their land under Anishinabe practices remains a big issue.

Beze Gray was born and raised in Canada's Chemical valley in the Aamjiwnaang First Nation. The valley, they describe, contains several petrochemical facilities that extract and process oils that turn into other products, such as plastics.

They explain how confused and disconnected they were growing up near rivers they couldn't touch, as dangerous chemicals were inside, lands being deserted by the moose, fish, and deer, seeing clouds pumped out of smokestacks, and lakes devastated by oil spills.

And the land isn't the only thing affected, Gray said.

"It impacted our health drastically," argues the youth activist. "We have things like a birth ratio, two girls for every one boy, and that is a really big impact to make on a small community of 850 people that live on reserve. We have things like cancers, we have been studied to have mercury in our hairs, PCBs (polychlorinated biphenyls) in our blood systems, and things like genetic chemicals".

"They treated us as guinea pigs. They didn't know what would happen," exclaims the youth activist. "We ended up being sick... our traditional ways of life and even our whole landscape have been altered by colonization".

For Beze Gray, this is a clear case of environmental racism².

² Environmental racism refers to how Indigenous and racialized communities are disproportionately burdened with health hazards through policies and practices that force them to live in proximity to polluted areas (Waldron, 2021).

Climate discussions often obscure the longer-term causes of exposure and precarity that enable weather events and trends to trigger crises. They also retain an implicit bias towards western agendas and frames as well as maintaining unequal colonial relationships. Climate diplomacy cannot escape discussions about climate justice³.

"Indigenous groups have too little agency over what goes on in their territory," affirms Beze Gray.

Indigenous people's jurisdiction over land, water, and people remains dismissed and highly contested in Canada, remarks Terri-Lynn Williams-Davidson. The lack of state recognition towards Indigenous management practices, knowledge and laws is partly to blame.

Climate diplomacy requires tackling colonialism, environmental racism, and justice.

Challenges of Negotiating and Collaborating

For professor McGregor, northern agendas and frames of discussion dominate debates and action. Climate discussion often obscures the longer-term causes of exposure and precarity that enable weather events and trends to trigger crises.

The increasing integration of Indigenous Knowledge in Global and domestic policy plans is often inadequate, unethical, and extractive.

"Usually Indigenous people's solutions are put in other people's solutions," explains professor McGregor, "Other people's solutions aren't the priorities of Indigenous people."

"This process of often wanting to extract from Indigenous peoples and stick it into other frameworks. That's a real compulsion!" says McGregor. It is often unethical and inappropriate to extract Indigenous Knowledge from their context and purpose.

"There is a real narrative about protecting Indigenous knowledge but totally forget about the people," says Deborah McGregor.

However, Terri-Lynn stays quite hopeful.

Since 1993, the Canadian government and the Haida Nation signed the Gwaii Haanas Agreement to govern the terrestrial portion of Gwaii Haanas as a national park reserve cooperatively. The Gwaii Haanas Marine Agreement followed in 2010. This governance structure is unique in the equal decision-making power to Canada and the Council of the Haida Nation and its grounding in both Canadian and Haida law⁴.

³ A term which explains how those who are least responsible for climate change – the most vulnerable, disadvantaged and marginalised – tend to suffer its gravest impacts (McGregor, 2021).

⁴ It is important to recognize the long-historical ties of the Haida to the land. Longtime stewards of this area, the Haida Nation has been watching over Gwaii Haanas for more than 12,000 years.

"That management plan took 30 years to negotiate from 1988 to 2018," claims Terri-Lynn, " the hard work was how will we manage that area and what are the laws that will guide the management of that area."

Despite these successes, the battle for state recognition towards Haida laws, Knowledge, and jurisdiction is ongoing. Terri-Lynn and the Haida nation are now fighting for Haida laws to be recognized over ocean floors.

"Great successes still take time to bear fruit," reminds Terri-Lynn.

In many ways, building diplomatic capacity includes unsettling the current power dynamics, supporting Indigenous sovereignty, and valuing Indigenous Knowledge, laws, and worldviews in their integrity. It also requires expanding the different meanings of diplomacy.

Expanding Climate Diplomacy

Climate diplomacy, for Indigenous groups, goes beyond the human dimension. It includes other entities.

Lawyer and artist Terri-Lynn explains how Haida worldviews can help us shift meanings around climate diplomacy.

According to Haida cosmologies, Haida Gwaii is an island that floats on the ocean realm. It balances upon a pole resting on the chest of a supernatural being. The oral history highlights the importance of 'yahguudang', meaning "'responsibilities' that you feel in your heart and your chest."

There are no 'rights' to the land, oceans, names, and other beings in Haida laws. Instead, there are 'privileges'. These may be taken away if responsibilities to the earth, oceans, beings, and the supernatural world are not met.

"It requires a paradigm shift," explains the Haida lawyer, "It no longer becomes a question of imposing obligations but rather accepting responsibilities."

"What actions am I committing to doing for the best interest of holding up the Earth?"

This brings a new meaning to climate diplomacy. Climate diplomacy thus becomes this space whereby "we recognise the responsibilities that each of us has to change the course of history for our future generations."

Over time, Terri-Lynn hopes to see these concepts of responsibility, reciprocity, and careful balance to the natural world at the forefront of climate change discourses.

"We are, however, not there yet," she says.

Building Sovereignty and Diplomacy

There is a great need to learn and dialogue with Indigenous people in the wake of environmental catastrophe. "There is something about Indigenous knowledge and languages that really resonates about taking care of the earth responsibly," points out the Anishinabe professor.

The importance of strengthening, revitalizing, and sustaining Indigenous laws, languages, and governing methods become fundamental in building diplomatic power and transforming meanings around diplomacy.

"Indigenous peoples are complete societies... It was here before colonization and is still here," says Deborah McGregor. "Sometimes it gets forgotten."

Diplomatic spaces need to uphold Indigenous Peoples' inherent right and authority to decide their well-being.

Sustaining Indigenous leadership, autonomy, and sovereignty, requires supporting resurgence, reconciliatory, and decolonization processes.

"Our way of healing is going back to our culture and communities, to reconnect with our ways of life that used to be. It's healing us from traumas that happened from colonization and reconnecting us to our land", says Beze Gray.

"The people have to be able to do their work on the land where the knowledge is generated, talked about, and language," adds Deborah McGregor.

Finally, 'respect' needs to be at the forefront of these discussions. As Terri-Lynn says, "the word for law in the Haida language is 'Til yahda,' and it means speaking with respect... Often, what we hear and see on the ground is so different, and this concept of 'Til yahda' is not being integrated... we need to find a way to bridge that divide".

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