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# EVIDENCE BRIEF

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SSHRC's Imagining Canada's Future initiative mobilizes social sciences and humanities research to address emerging economic, societal and knowledge needs for Canada, and help guide decision-making across all sectors towards a better future. This evidence brief addresses the Future Challenge Area of: **Informing Best Practices in Environmental and Impact Assessments**.

## Beyond participation and distribution: advancing a comprehensive justice framework for impact assessment

### About the project

Industrial projects bring about dramatic social change. With the *Impact Assessment Act*, 2019 (IAA) there is a greater emphasis on the social impacts of development and on the “meaningful participation” of citizens in impact assessment (IA). It is widely believed that meaningful participation can improve the legitimacy of development and even provide a step toward reconciliation with Indigenous peoples—a commitment set out explicitly in the IAA.

To foster meaningful participation and deliver sound decisions, impact assessments must be just. While this is true in general, it is particularly important in Canada as assessments shift from a technical focus on environmental risk to a broader examination of the social, cultural, economic and health

impacts of proposed development projects under the IAA. Calls have been made for integrating justice more centrally in impact assessment practice and evaluation, but work is needed to inform just IA processes.

This project draws on a framework of justice that emerges from environmental justice scholarship and activism, and defines it along three interdependent dimensions: distribution, representation and recognition. The project tests the hypothesis that there is a gap in research that addresses all three dimensions of this justice framework. It also assesses how this gap in research might translate into, or reflect, a gap in methods for guiding meaningful participation in IA. Finally, it draws best practices in just IA out of the existing scholarship.

### Key findings

- Impact assessments are foremost issues of justice, not of environmental management. Justice provides a conceptual framework that can help identify emerging points of tension and suggest remedial action. In Canada, as in other jurisdictions, growing inequities threaten both social and natural environments. Claims of injustice are increasingly central in conflicts over industrial development. Recent disputes over the Coastal GasLink pipeline, for example, stem from long-standing tensions rooted in inequitable resource distribution, settler-colonialism and regional conflicts.
- A review of academic articles, technical reports, government documents and media articles highlights

that articles that address justice in IA typically focus on either its distributional or procedural dimensions. Yet, best practices in the literature reveal that just IA accounts for all three forms of justice as they are interrelated. For instance, much of the IA literature and practice from the United States emphasizes distributional aspects of environmental justice by advancing quantification measures for designating an “environmental justice community.” While helpful for community attempts to seek redress or resources in instances of injustice, quantification and standardization present challenges from the perspective of representation and recognition because they often involve top-down centralization of decision-making power in IA. Just IA should engage



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communities in defining harms, impacts and what constitutes an “environmental justice community” (that is, a community made vulnerable by such harms and impacts).

- The Canadian context for IA is unique and instructive about the importance of the recognition dimensions of justice. This review revealed that there is comparatively less work on recognition than on the other forms of justice. What exists is most often situated within scholarship that specifically addresses Indigenous knowledge and often appears outside of IA literature. It reveals that definitions

and languages that are built into IA processes often favour western norms and were developed within the context of western approaches to governance.

- There are inherent challenges to translating theoretical and policy ideals into practice. Ultimately there is no “silver bullet” for just IA. As such, this report gives practitioners and policy-makers “sensitizing concepts” that can be used to structure engagement with communities to advance meaningful participation.

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## Policy implications

Working from the above observations, the final report offers a number of recommendations for researchers, policy-makers and practitioners of IA, including the following:

- That future research on just IA focus on recognitional justice, which will be helpful for Canadian IA policy and practice where issues of Indigenous sovereignty and jurisdiction are front-and-centre in IA decisions. Additionally, on-the-ground Canadian best practices need to be synthesized for decision-making communities, in order to connect what now appear to be disparate academic conversations on IA relating to Indigenous Knowledge on the one hand and environmental justice on the other.

- Considerations of justice need to be brought to the fore at every stage of the IA process—from initial planning and scoping to post-assessment considerations of how environmental, economic and cultural harms and benefits are distributed.
- In the Canadian context, just IA will only be achieved when Indigenous approaches are incorporated into IA processes and when decision-making power is shared symmetrically between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples, as well as equitably among members within Indigenous communities.

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## CONTACT THE RESEARCHERS:

**Kelly Bronson**, Canada Research Chair in Science and Society, University of Ottawa; [kbronson@uottawa.ca](mailto:kbronson@uottawa.ca)

**Gwendolyn Blue**, associate professor, Department of Geography, University of Calgary; [ggblue@ucalgary.ca](mailto:ggblue@ucalgary.ca)

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## FURTHER INFORMATION:

[▶ Read the full report](#)

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The views expressed in this evidence brief are those of the authors and not those of SSHRC, IAAC and the Government of Canada.

The Impact Assessment Agency of Canada (IAAC) is a federal body accountable to the minister of Environment and Climate Change. The IAAC delivers high-quality impact assessments that contribute to informed decision-making on major projects in support of sustainable development.

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