European Journal of Sustainable Development (2026), **15**, 4, 771-782 ISSN: 2239-5938
Doi: 10.14207/ejsd.2026.v15n4p771

Sustaining Relationships: Reflections on Indigenous Ways of Knowing and Community Development Practice

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ABSTRACT:
Sustainability is commonly described through environmental, economic, and social dimensions. Increasingly, scholars have recognized culture as an essential component of sustainable development, acknowledging that communities cannot flourish without sustaining the values, identities, and knowledge systems that shape collective life. Indigenous ways of knowing broaden this understanding by emphasizing relationships, reciprocity, responsibility, and balance. This reflective conceptual article examines how teachings represented by the Medicine Wheel have shaped my practice as a community development educator, organizational development practitioner, and strategic planning facilitator. Drawing upon Indigenous scholarship, community development literature, previous action inquiry research, and professional practice, I suggest that Indigenous ways of knowing offer practical insights for sustainable community development by encouraging leaders to balance purpose, relationships, knowledge, and action. A 15-month planning process involving approximately 200 people at the College of Menominee Nation illustrates how a culturally grounded approach can deepen organizational planning by connecting identity, responsibility, participation, and implementation. The paper argues that planning can be strengthened when communities lead from culture rather than adapting culture to externally developed processes. It concludes that sustainability is strengthened when communities recognize that their futures are fundamentally interconnected.

Keywords: Indigenous ways of knowing; sustainability; community development; Medicine Wheel; organizational development; strategic planning; relational leadership

1. Introduction

Sustainability has traditionally been understood through three interconnected dimensions: environmental stewardship, economic vitality, and social well-being. More recently, scholars have argued that culture should be recognized as an equally important dimension because it shapes how communities understand identity, responsibility, and the future (Hawkes, 2001; Soini & Birkeland, 2014). Indigenous knowledge systems extend this conversation further by reminding us that sustainable development is not solely about managing resources. It is also about sustaining the relationships that allow communities to flourish across generations.

Culture is more visible in sustainability discourse than it once was, but it is still often treated as content to be incorporated into an otherwise unchanged planning process.

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A consultation may include culturally relevant language, imagery, or activities while leaving the underlying assumptions about knowledge, authority, evidence, and decision making intact. This article considers a different possibility: planning itself can begin with culture. In that approach, cultural teachings do not decorate or supplement a process. They help determine the questions that are asked, the relationships that are honored, the forms of knowledge that matter, and the responsibilities that guide action.

Although sustainability has become a global priority, practitioners continue to face a persistent challenge. Communities often possess strategic plans, technical expertise, and committed leaders, yet long-term implementation remains difficult. In my experience as a community development educator, organizational development practitioner, and strategic planning facilitator, the greatest obstacles have rarely resulted from a lack of information or commitment. More often, organizations have struggled to maintain balance among purpose, relationships, learning, and action.

For more than three decades, I have worked alongside Tribal Nations, nonprofit organizations, local governments, universities, and community leaders engaged in planning and organizational change. During that time, I found myself asking a recurring question: Why do some communities continue to grow stronger long after a planning process ends while others struggle to sustain momentum despite thoughtful planning and dedicated leadership?

Initially, I searched for answers within the disciplines in which I had been trained. Strategic planning, organizational development, systems thinking, and community development each offered valuable perspectives. Senge (2006) describes learning organizations as places where people continually expand their capacity to create desired results, while Wheatley (2006) reminds leaders that organizations function more like living systems than machines. These perspectives were useful, but over time I came to realize that another way of knowing had quietly reshaped how I understood the work itself.

Teachings represented by the Medicine Wheel did not give me a new way to practice community development. They gave me a new way to understand why some communities flourish while others struggle.

I recognize that teachings represented by the Medicine Wheel differ among Indigenous Nations and communities. Accordingly, this paper does not attempt to define or generalize those teachings. Instead, I write from my own experience as a member of the Menominee Nation whose professional practice has been shaped by Indigenous ways of knowing.

Growing up, I did not think about these teachings as a methodology. They were simply part of how I understood community, responsibility, and relationships. Like many forms of cultural knowledge, they were learned gradually through observation, participation, and experience rather than through formal instruction. It was only years later, after working with communities, organizations, and leaders across diverse settings, that I recognized how deeply these teachings had influenced the questions I asked, the way I facilitated planning processes, and the way I understood organizational change.

This realization did not change what I did nearly as much as it changed how I understood what I had been doing. Rather than viewing community development as a collection of planning techniques or organizational interventions, I came to understand it as the work of strengthening the relationships that make sustainable change possible.

Teachings represented by the Medicine Wheel did not become a tool that I applied to community development. Instead, they became a lens through which I could better understand why some communities flourish while others struggle.

This article is a reflective conceptual paper informed by Indigenous scholarship, community development literature, my previous action inquiry research (Jones, 2014), and more than three decades of professional practice. It does not present new empirical findings. Instead, it brings scholarship and practitioner experience together to explore how Indigenous ways of knowing have informed one approach to sustainable community development. The paper suggests that these ways of knowing offer valuable insights for sustainability practitioners because they encourage a more holistic understanding of community, responsibility, and change.

1.1 Reflective approach and basis for interpretation

I developed this analysis through an iterative process of reflection rather than through a new research study. I began with recurring observations from planning and organizational change work. Processes were more likely to endure when people shared a clear sense of purpose, participated meaningfully, learned together, and developed practical structures for implementation. I then revisited my doctoral action inquiry, which examined the use of a Native American Medicine Wheel in strategic plan implementation, and considered how its cycles of visioning, strategizing, acting, and assessing continued to appear in later practice (Jones, 2014; Torbert, 2004).

I selected scholarship that helped me interpret these recurring observations from several related vantage points. Indigenous scholarship helped me examine relationality, reciprocity, responsibility, place, and the ethics of knowledge. Community development and sustainability literature helped me consider participation, local capacity, culture, and stewardship. Organizational learning and action inquiry literature helped me examine how intentions become coordinated action and how reflection remains connected to practice. I did not treat these bodies of scholarship as interchangeable. I read them alongside one another to identify areas of resonance, tension, and difference.

I interpreted my professional experience through repeated cycles of facilitation, observation, reflection, and adjustment. After significant planning engagements, I reviewed what appeared to strengthen or weaken shared ownership, implementation, and trust. I paid particular attention to the questions participants returned to, the moments when conversations shifted, and the conditions under which people connected strategy to identity and responsibility. The College of Menominee Nation example is a descriptive illustration from practice, not an evaluated case study. The claims drawn from it are intentionally modest and rest on documented participation, process design, planning products, and participant observations rather than causal attribution.

This approach has limitations. My reflection is shaped by my positionality, relationships, and interpretation. The article does not claim to represent all Indigenous communities, test the effectiveness of the framework, or establish that one planning approach produces superior outcomes. Its purpose is conceptual and practical: to make visible a way of understanding planning that emerged through the interaction of cultural teachings, scholarship, action inquiry, and sustained practice.

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2. Indigenous Ways of Knowing and Community Development

Indigenous ways of knowing are diverse, place-based, and grounded in the histories and teachings of particular Nations and communities. For this reason, they should not be treated as a single body of knowledge or translated into a universal model. At the same time, Indigenous scholars have identified themes that are relevant to sustainability and community development, including relationality, reciprocity, responsibility, and respect for place (Cajete, 2000; Kimmerer, 2013; Wilson, 2008). These themes provide an important counterbalance to approaches that view development primarily as technical intervention or economic growth.

It is important to distinguish between points of resonance across Indigenous scholarship and teachings that belong to particular Nations. Relationality, reciprocity, and responsibility appear in the work of many Indigenous scholars, but they are expressed through distinct languages, histories, governance systems, spiritual traditions, and relationships to place. Similarity does not make these teachings universal or interchangeable. The Medicine Wheel interpretation described later in this paper reflects the teachings and experiences that have shaped my own practice. It is not offered as a portable Indigenous model for practitioners to reproduce elsewhere.

Cajete (2000) describes Indigenous knowledge as emerging through participation in the natural world and through relationships with place. Kimmerer (2013) reminds readers that reciprocity is not simply an ethical ideal but a way of living within systems of mutual responsibility. Wilson (2008) argues that relationships are central to Indigenous epistemology, meaning that knowledge is not separate from the people, places, and responsibilities through which it is created. These perspectives resonate with community development because communities are not merely geographic units or service populations. They are networks of relationships, memory, identity, and shared possibility.

Community development literature has long emphasized participation, local leadership, and asset-based approaches. Emery and Flora (2006), for example, describe community transformation through the Community Capitals Framework, highlighting the importance of strengthening multiple forms of capital within a community. Sen (1999) approaches development as the expansion of human freedom and capability, while Max-Neef (1991) emphasizes human-scale development rooted in fundamental human needs. Ostrom (1990) demonstrates that communities can develop durable systems for governing shared resources when they build trust, reciprocity, and locally meaningful rules. Although these scholars write from different traditions, their work shares an important insight: sustainable development depends upon the relationships and capacities that allow communities to govern, learn, and act together.

Indigenous scholarship extends this insight by placing relationships at the center rather than treating them as one factor among many. From this perspective, sustainability is not simply the continuation of programs, institutions, or resources. It is the continuation of responsibilities. It asks whether communities can maintain healthy relationships with one another, with the places that sustain them, and with generations not yet born. Deloria and Wildcat (2001) argue that place and power are inseparable in Indigenous education, while Wildcat (2009) suggests that Indigenous knowledge offers vital guidance for responding to ecological and social crises. Smith (2021) similarly reminds researchers and

practitioners that knowledge production is never neutral, especially when working with Indigenous peoples and communities.

Recent scholarship reinforces the importance of beginning with Indigenous rights, values, and knowledge systems rather than inviting Indigenous participation only after institutional arrangements have been established. David-Chavez et al. (2024) offer a values-centered relational science model in which integrity, respect, humility, and reciprocity shape both methods and long-term accountability. Weir et al. (2024) argue that centering Indigenous peoples requires institutions to reset their assumptions and take Indigenous knowledge seriously on its own terms. In the context of Indigenous enterprise development, Maclean et al. (2024) likewise show that planning grounded in culture can protect cultural governance and integrity while supporting practical economic outcomes. These studies point toward a shift from treating culture as an accommodation to recognizing it as a source of direction.

These perspectives have important implications for community development practice. If knowledge is relational, then facilitation is not merely the management of meetings. It is the creation of conditions in which people can listen, remember, disagree, imagine, and act together. If sustainability is relational, then planning is not simply the production of goals and strategies. It is the work of strengthening the relationships that make implementation possible. If responsibility extends to future generations, then evaluation cannot focus only on short-term outputs. It must also ask whether the work contributes to long-term community well-being, cultural continuity, and shared capacity.

Practitioners working outside a particular Indigenous context should not take from this discussion a license to borrow a Medicine Wheel or another culturally grounded framework. The more useful lesson is to reconsider where their own practice begins. Communities can identify the teachings, relationships, histories, and responsibilities that should shape the work before an external planning model is selected. This approach allows practitioners to learn from relational responsibility without extracting the cultural form through which it is expressed.

3. The Medicine Wheel as a Framework for Practice

In my practice, teachings represented by the Medicine Wheel have helped me hold these ideas together. The Medicine Wheel is often represented as a circle organized around four directions or dimensions. Different Nations and teachers understand and use the Medicine Wheel in different ways, and I do not present the framework here as fixed or universal. The version that has informed my work emphasizes Spirit, Heart, Mind, and Body. These dimensions have helped me think about purpose, relationships, knowledge, and action as interdependent aspects of community development.

Looking back across many planning processes, I realized that I returned repeatedly to four simple questions: Why does this work matter? Who are we becoming together? What do we need to understand? How will we move forward? At first, these questions emerged intuitively through practice. Later, especially through my doctoral work on the use of a Native American Medicine Wheel to facilitate strategic plan implementation, I recognized how closely they reflected teachings of balance and wholeness represented by the Medicine Wheel (Jones, 2014).

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The correspondences among Spirit, Heart, Mind, Body, and the four questions are not rigid one-to-one assignments. Each dimension informs the others, and any important planning question can involve all four. The pairings below identify a primary emphasis that has been useful in my practice. Their value lies in keeping dimensions of the work in relationship, not in sorting human experience into separate categories.

Spirit primarily invites attention to purpose: Why does this work matter? It asks participants to move beyond organizational language and consider the higher calling of what they are meant to do together. In many planning processes, people move quickly toward goals, strategies, and tasks. Yet without a shared sense of purpose, implementation can become mechanical. Purpose helps a community remember what it is responsible for, what it hopes to protect or create, and why the work is worth doing. Spirit is not confined to formal spirituality. It names the animating intention that gives collective work meaning.

Heart primarily invites attention to relationship, self-awareness, and situational awareness: Who are we becoming together? In practice, this includes honest questions such as: What gets in the way of achieving our purpose? What helps us achieve it? Who is carrying hurt, uncertainty, or responsibility into the room? Whose voice is present, whose is missing, and what histories shape the conversation? Planning often identifies stakeholders, partners, and target audiences, but it may not adequately consider the quality of relationships among them. Heart reminds practitioners that trust, belonging, courage, and accountability influence what a group is able to imagine and carry forward.

Mind primarily invites attention to understanding and strategic choice: What do we need to understand? Once purpose is clear and the helping and hindering conditions are more visible, participants can ask which one or two strategies might make the greatest difference. Data, analysis, institutional knowledge, community experience, and technical expertise all remain essential. Indigenous ways of knowing do not reject analysis. Rather, they place analysis within a broader context of relationship and responsibility. Knowledge is most useful when it helps communities make wise choices in relation to their values and obligations.

Body primarily invites attention to action and operationalization: How will we move forward? This dimension asks what must be known before beginning, which actions should be taken, who will take responsibility, what resources are required, and how progress will be assessed. Many strategic plans fail because they do not create structures that sustain implementation. Action requires clear roles, timelines, resources, and practices for continued learning. It also requires the discipline to return to purpose, relationship, and understanding as conditions change.

These dimensions overlap continuously. A discussion about action may reveal a relationship problem. New data may cause a group to reconsider purpose. A conflict may uncover an unspoken value or lead to a better strategy. The circular form of the Medicine Wheel is therefore as important as the four dimensions. It discourages a linear assumption that planning begins with vision and ends with implementation. Instead, it invites repeated movement among purpose, relationships, understanding, and action.

There is a useful point of comparison with Torbert's (2004) action inquiry domains of visioning, strategizing, performing, and assessing. Both approaches emphasize integration and iterative learning rather than a single planning event. I used action inquiry in my doctoral research because it provided language for examining how intentions,

strategies, actions, and outcomes inform one another (Jones, 2014). The similarity does not make the frameworks equivalent. The Medicine Wheel carries cultural, relational, and spiritual meanings that cannot be reduced to an organizational cycle. Action inquiry offers a Western theoretical point of connection, while the Medicine Wheel remains the culturally grounded source that shaped how I understood balance in practice.

Table 1 summarizes the reflective questions that have emerged through this practice. The table is not intended to reduce the Medicine Wheel to a planning checklist. Rather, it illustrates how teachings of balance can inform practical questions for community development and organizational change.

Table 1: Reflective questions that have emerged through this practice

Medicine Wheel dimension	Reflective question	Community development focus	Illustrative practice
Spirit	Why does this work matter?	Purpose and values	Shared vision, responsibility, and stewardship
Heart	Who are we becoming together?	Relationships, awareness, and belonging	Trust, participation, voice, and helping or hindering conditions
Mind	What do we need to understand?	Learning and strategy	Data, reflection, shared meaning, and strategic choice
Body	How will we move forward?	Action and accountability	Implementation, roles, measures, and adaptation

Practitioners should therefore resist using the table independently of the cautions surrounding it. The questions may be useful as reflective prompts, but the Medicine Wheel itself should not be presented as a standardized planning instrument detached from the people, teachings, and responsibilities that give it meaning. In non-Indigenous settings, facilitators can use the underlying challenge rather than the cultural form: What does this community understand as purpose? What relationships require attention? What ways of knowing should guide decisions? What structures will translate intention into action?

4. A Practice Example

A recent strategic planning process with the College of Menominee Nation illustrates how Indigenous perspectives can reshape planning without replacing the practical tools of organizational development. Like many institutions, the College faced questions about priorities, organizational effectiveness, long-term direction, and community impact. Surveys, facilitated conversations, and strategic analysis all played important roles in the process. These are familiar components of planning.

The planning process unfolded over 15 months and involved approximately 200 people. It began with an introduction to strategic planning at an all-faculty and staff convocation and a planning retreat with the Board of Directors. Faculty and staff were then invited to participate in a survey focused on mission, vision, and values. The survey achieved a 91% response rate, providing unusually broad employee participation. A separate community survey invited input from Menominee Nation Tribal members,

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members of other Tribal communities, current students, alumni, potential employers of graduates, and organizational partners.

Participation continued through mission, vision, and values design teams; multiple planning sessions with members of the President's Cabinet; and later implementation teams charged with connecting the emerging plan to action and key performance indicators. A Council for Strategic Change was established to bring together grassroots and leadership support. This layered structure was intended to reduce the common gap between creating a plan and carrying it out. It also provided repeated opportunities for people to see how their ideas influenced the developing direction of the College.

The process generated several kinds of descriptive evidence. Faculty and staff survey responses documented strong commitment to the College's mission and cultural foundation while also identifying needs for clearer alignment, communication, follow-through, and accountability. Community responses affirmed the importance of culture, student support, workforce pathways, and community engagement. Design teams and facilitated sessions translated these perspectives into revised mission, vision, and values language, strategic priorities, implementation responsibilities, and draft indicators. These materials shaped the 2025–2030 institutional plan; they were not collected as research data for this article.

The Medicine Wheel informed the planning sequence. Spirit invited participants to consider the higher calling of the College and what the institution was meant to accomplish with and for the Menominee people. Heart supported assessment of the internal and external conditions that helped or hindered that purpose. Mind guided participants toward a small number of strategies that could make a meaningful difference. Body moved the work into operational questions involving actions, responsibilities, measures, resources, and reporting. The framework helped the planning process remain connected to purpose and relationship even as the work became more technical.

The use of the Menominee Clan System most clearly distinguished this process. The clan animals were not added as cultural imagery after the strategic goals had been written. They framed institutional responsibilities from the beginning. Bear, Golden Eagle, Wolf, Crane, and Moose became guideposts for academic excellence, infrastructure and access, community engagement, student growth and creativity, and culture and identity. This structure connected contemporary higher education responsibilities to Menominee cultural governance and to an understanding that different gifts and roles contribute to the well-being of the whole.

This shifted the nature of the planning conversation. Instead of focusing only on institutional priorities, participants were also invited to consider the College's responsibilities to students, families, community members, and future generations. The discussion moved beyond organizational efficiency to include cultural continuity, leadership development, stewardship, and the role of education in sustaining the Nation. In this sense, planning became more than a management exercise. It became a process of asking what kind of institution the community needed the College to become.

Members of the President's Cabinet observed that the process was substantially more collaborative than the College's previous strategic planning effort, which had been developed and directed more heavily by the Board. This observation is not presented as a measured outcome, but it does show how participants experienced the process. The broad

employee response rate, community participation, design teams, and implementation structures provide further evidence that ownership was distributed across more groups than in the previous approach.

The four reflective questions were useful in holding the process together. The question of purpose invited participants to consider why the College's work mattered within the broader life of the Menominee Nation. The question of relationship encouraged attention to who needed to be heard and how the planning process could strengthen trust. The question of knowledge helped participants consider survey findings, community perspectives, and institutional data. The question of action moved the process toward priorities and implementation without allowing action to become separated from values.

The process was still underway as this article was prepared, so it would be premature to claim that it produced stronger long-term implementation or institutional sustainability. The creation of cross-functional implementation teams, draft key performance indicators, quarterly reporting expectations, and a Council for Strategic Change does, however, establish concrete structures through which accountability can be assessed over time. These structures also respond directly to concerns raised by employees and community members about visibility, alignment, and follow-through.

This example also illustrates a broader lesson. Sustainable planning is not achieved simply by producing a well-written document. A plan becomes sustainable when it strengthens the relationships, responsibilities, and shared commitments necessary to carry the work forward. In Indigenous contexts, these relationships are often connected to land, language, culture, community, and future generations. In other contexts, the specific cultural forms may differ, but the underlying need for purpose, relationship, knowledge, and action remains.

5. Discussion

The College of Menominee Nation example suggests several implications for sustainable community development. First, Indigenous ways of knowing can deepen sustainability practice by shifting the starting point of planning. Conventional planning often begins with problems, needs, or goals. These are important, but they may not be the best first questions. Beginning with purpose and relationship can help communities clarify what they are trying to sustain and why it matters.

This emphasis is consistent with recent work calling for Indigenous knowledge and governance to shape the terms of planning rather than enter only after institutional priorities have been established. David-Chavez et al. (2024) describe relational accountability as a condition of ethical knowledge practice, while Weir et al. (2024) argue that institutions must reset assumptions and relationships if Indigenous knowledge is to be engaged on its own terms. The College example offers a practitioner illustration from organizational planning: culture influenced the architecture of the plan, the sequence of questions, the structure for participation, and the proposed means of implementation.

Second, the framework described here suggests that sustainability requires balance. Communities and organizations often develop strengths in one dimension while neglecting others. Some have strong analysis but weak relationships. Others have strong relationships but lack implementation structures. Some have compelling visions but

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limited accountability. Others are highly action-oriented but lose sight of values and purpose. Teachings represented by the Medicine Wheel encourage practitioners to ask whether purpose, relationships, knowledge, and action are being held together.

This focus on balance differs from approaches that treat relational concerns as a preliminary step before the real work of strategy begins. In the framework described here, relationship is part of strategy. Trust affects which information is shared, whose knowledge is considered credible, whether conflict can be addressed, and whether people accept responsibility for implementation. Purpose likewise remains active throughout the process rather than being confined to a mission statement. The four questions make these less visible dimensions easier to discuss while keeping them connected to decisions and action.

Third, the framework supports an understanding of culture as foundational rather than supplemental. In sustainability discourse, culture is sometimes added as a fourth pillar alongside environmental, economic, and social dimensions (Hawkes, 2001; UNESCO, 2022). That recognition is important. Yet Indigenous ways of knowing suggest that culture is not simply one dimension among others. Culture shapes how communities understand the environment, economy, society, and future generations. It shapes what counts as knowledge, who is responsible for acting, and what outcomes matter.

The idea of leading from culture is most important here. Indigenous people are routinely asked to adapt themselves to dominant institutions, categories, and processes. Even well-intentioned efforts at cultural relevance may begin with a dominant model and then ask how it can be modified for Indigenous participants. My experience suggests a different sequence. When working with Indigenous communities, I invite participants to begin unapologetically from their own cultural teachings and then determine which outside tools are useful. Culture is not only something to preserve. It can also be a source of healing, resilience, continuity, and practical direction.

Maclean et al. (2024) reach a related conclusion in their study of Indigenous enterprise planning, where culture functions as an enabler rather than an obstacle to development. Their work and the College example differ in context and evidence, but both challenge one-size-fits-all development models and emphasize Indigenous leadership and cultural governance. This article extends that insight to community and organizational planning by showing how culture can shape the questions, roles, and implementation structures of a process.

Fourth, this approach has implications for leadership. Leadership in community development is often associated with vision, coordination, and decision making. These remain important. However, a relational understanding of sustainability suggests that leadership also involves helping communities maintain balance. Leaders must attend to the visible work of planning and implementation, but also to the less visible work of trust, belonging, memory, and meaning. This is especially important in university, public-sector, and community-based settings where change depends on collaboration across difference.

Relational leadership in this sense is not simply a warm or participatory style. It includes the responsibility to create conditions in which people can tell the truth about what helps and hinders collective purpose, to recognize knowledge that institutions have historically undervalued, and to build accountability without separating it from relationship. It also requires leaders and facilitators to examine their own authority. A culturally grounded process does not mean that an external practitioner becomes an expert

in the community's culture. It means that the practitioner helps create space for cultural knowledge holders and community responsibilities to guide the work.

Indigenous ways of knowing, then, should not be viewed only as cultural content to be included in sustainability work. They can also shape method by influencing the questions practitioners ask, the pace of planning, the definition of evidence, and the meaning of success. This does not mean that Indigenous frameworks should be generalized or extracted from their cultural contexts. It means that practitioners can approach Indigenous knowledge with humility, respect, and a willingness to learn.

For sustainability practitioners elsewhere, the transferable lesson is a principle rather than a template: begin with the culture of the community rather than assuming that the community must begin with the practitioner's model. The form will differ from place to place. A process may begin with language, kinship, faith, memory, land, local history, artistic practice, or another source of collective meaning. The task is not to make every process look Indigenous. It is to recognize that every community has ways of knowing and responsibilities that can inform how sustainable change is understood and pursued.

The limits of this article also point toward future inquiry. Comparative, community-led research could examine how relational planning frameworks operate in different Indigenous settings under appropriate governance, consent, data sovereignty, and locally defined measures of benefit. Longitudinal study of the College process could assess whether the implementation teams, clan-aligned indicators, and Council for Strategic Change contribute to sustained participation, accountability, institutional learning, and cultural continuity. Such research should be designed and governed with the communities involved rather than using the framework offered here as an externally imposed instrument.

6. Conclusion

Sustainable development is often described as a responsibility to future generations. Indigenous ways of knowing remind us that this responsibility begins in relationship. It begins with how communities understand place, how people care for one another, how institutions remember their obligations, and how present decisions shape future possibilities.

The Medicine Wheel has influenced my practice not as a universal model to be applied across all settings, but as a way of attending to balance. It has encouraged me to ask whether purpose, relationships, knowledge, and action are being considered together. It has helped me understand why some planning processes lead to sustained change while others produce documents that are difficult to implement. Most importantly, it has reminded me that community development is not simply about solving problems. It is about helping communities become stronger while solving them.

These reflections are intentionally modest. They do not attempt to define Indigenous ways of knowing or offer a complete theory of sustainable community development. They suggest that Indigenous perspectives can help sustainability practitioners ask deeper questions about relationship, responsibility, and long-term well-being. In a world facing complex social, environmental, and institutional challenges, those questions matter.

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This article contributes a practitioner-informed account of relational planning. Its central proposition is that culture should not be treated only as a dimension of sustainability or as an adaptation to an existing planning model. Culture can be a legitimate starting point for planning itself. The four reflective questions offer one way to keep purpose, relationship, knowledge, and action connected. The College of Menominee Nation example shows how a community's own cultural governance can shape participation, priorities, and implementation.

This proposition must remain grounded in humility. The lesson is not that practitioners should transfer the Medicine Wheel or Menominee Clan System into other settings. It is that communities should be supported in beginning from their own teachings, identities, and responsibilities. When planning grows from those sources, technical tools can serve the community rather than requiring the community to reshape itself around the tools.

Sustainability begins when we recognize that our futures are tied together.

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