

Effective and Equitable Planetary Health Praxis is Decolonial, Observations from a Black Femme

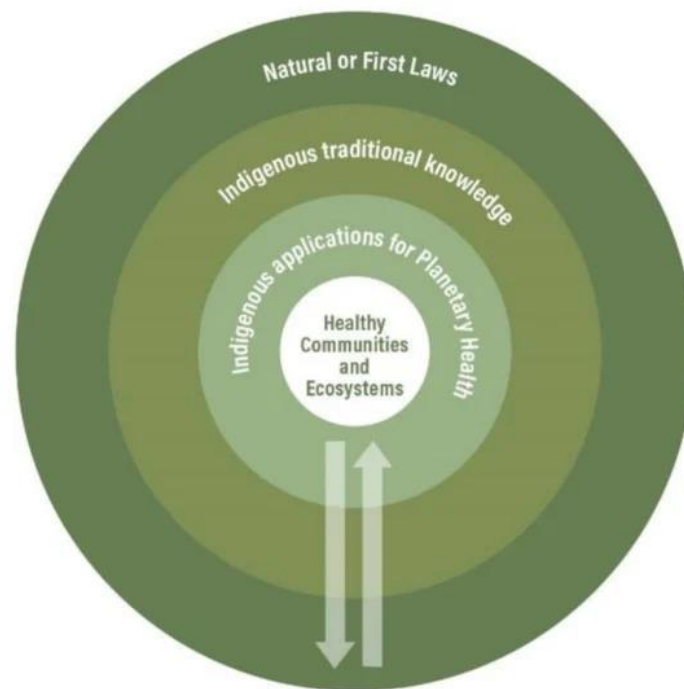


Author: Yolanda Watungwa
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My name is Yolanda Watungwa and I graduate from Dalhousie University with a Bachelor of Science in Health Promotion with Honours this May. As a Black femme and a student of health promotion, I move through this world with an eye for (in)equity. My educational and professional backgrounds have set a precedent of using equity as the lens through which I learn and approach change. I see power in having a comprehensive awareness of context and a critical eye for understanding why things are the way they are. I offer gratitude to be concluding my degree with an internship at the [Healthy Populations Institute \(HPI\)](#), conducting research pertaining to the *Creating Sustainable Health Systems in Climate Crisis* and *Improving Health Outcomes for People of African Descent* Flagship Projects. Learning about the interface of planetary health and inequity has created a new lens for how I contextualize the climate crisis and will approach climate action going forward. I now understand that effective and equitable planetary health praxis is decolonial. I hope that my observations working with the HPI team will prompt growth for you as well.

Observation # 1: The Indigenous language of Natural Law is a useful way to describe human beings' relationship with the planet

Language has a monumental influence on how we conceptualize the world around us. If we are going to incite radical change, we must establish a definition of planetary health that allows people to understand the complex reality of the climate crisis. It is interesting to witness the rise of the language of *sustainability* in the Western world because much of what is considered ‘new’, ‘innovative’ practices for sustainable living (e.g., using one item for multiple purposes) is rooted in principles that are foundational to Indigenous epistemology. Indigenous peoples know how-to live-in harmony with the needs of the planet and have been doing so for generations. It seems fitting to learn from their lexicon.



Redvers, N., Poelina, A., Schultz, C., Kobei, D. M., Githaiga, C., Perdrisat, M., Prince, D., & Blondin, B. (2020).

Indigenous Natural and First Law in Planetary Health. *Challenges*, 11(2), 29.

<https://doi.org/10.3390/challe11020029>

Natural Law can be described as a root principle in Indigenous knowledge that articulates protocols around reciprocity, responsibility, and respect for the wellbeing of the planet — a living entity. Indigenous works conceptualize planetary health with ecocentric language. Planetary health is the health of the planet, where human beings are an inextricable part of natural ecosystems. With the language rooted in Natural Law, Earth has inherent worth which exists outside of its capacity to satisfy humans. Western definitions, which are concerningly far more commonplace, describe planetary health anthropocentrically, as “the health of human civilization and the natural systems on which it depends.” In other words, the Earth is only a function for human health and the resources we need to sustain societal norms. If our societal norms have led to a climate crisis, should our efforts focus on how they can be sustained? I encourage the planetary health community to contemplate how they define planetary health, identify the degree to which their definition aligns with Indigenous conceptualizations, and reconfigure their definition accordingly.

Observation # 2: Colonialism and systemic racism are determinants of health that need to be addressed to create a sustainable health system

One of the intentions of creating a sustainable health system in a climate crisis is to reduce the demand for healthcare services, therefore reducing the environmental impact of the healthcare sector (estimated to be about 5% of Canada’s total carbon footprint). One way to reduce the demand of healthcare services is to cultivate environments where there are no barriers to achieving maximum health and wellbeing, often inviting questions around what determines our health. Our capacity to experience health with ease is often a question of social, structural, and environmental determinants of health.



Howard, C. (2022, January 31). Determinants of health [Keynote address]. Canada's COP26 Health Programme Commitment —
What's Next.

In health promotion much of our work is conceptualized through determinants of health. Our living conditions (e.g., income, housing, employment security, food security, gender) are intrinsically linked to the degree to which we face barriers to experiencing health and wellbeing. I invite you to consider the living conditions that colonialism and systemic racism create. I am not alone in understanding colonialism and systemic racism as phenomena that have not only informed our significantly inequitable healthcare system but also, perpetuate inequitable access to health. In the Canadian context, inequitable access to health and health services is especially relevant for Black and Indigenous peoples. Colonialism and systemic racism are determinants of health. If we know that addressing determinants of health will effectively reduce the need for people to seek healthcare services and thus reduce the demand of the healthcare system, then addressing systemic racism and colonialism are necessary for practicing effective planetary health. As goes for any systemic issue, unless people are actively dismantling the conditions that

create the problem, the harm caused by the problem continues. Moreover, in a colonial society, unless people are actively decolonial, the detriment of colonialism is upheld.

To revisit the idea that radical, paradigmatically shifted change is necessary for mobilizing effective climate action, I echo the notion that we cannot solve problems from the same perspective that created them. My observations while working at HPI have led me to understand that **effective and equitable planetary health praxis is decolonial.**

The knowledge I am sharing is supported by the content below. If you would like to know more, I encourage you to visit:

Czyzewski, K. (2011). Colonialism as a broader social determinant of health.

<https://ojs.lib.uwo.ca/index.php/iipj/article/view/7337>

Ratima, M. (2019). Leadership for planetary health and sustainable development: health promotion community capacities for working with Indigenous peoples in the application of Indigenous knowledge.

<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1757975919889250>

Redvers, N. (2021). The determinants of planetary health.

[https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanplh/article/PIIS2542-5196\(21\)00008-5/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanplh/article/PIIS2542-5196(21)00008-5/fulltext)

Thank you :)

