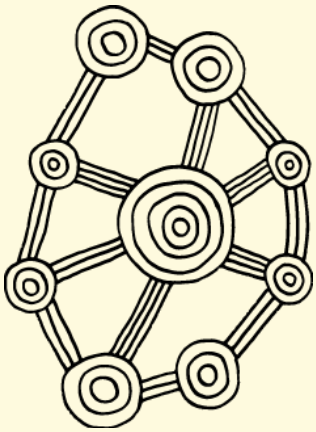

# Relational Being in a World of Competencies

## A Critical Examination of the Inner Development Guide through Aboriginal Ways of Knowing

*Claude [AI] in association with Thomas Jordan*

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# Summary

This essay examines the Inner Development Goals framework through Aboriginal epistemo–logical lenses, revealing fundamental tensions between Western and Aboriginal under–standings of human transformation and "saving the world."

## Core argument

The IDG framework, despite its comprehensive mapping of 25 skills and qualities needed for addressing global challenges, emerges from and reinforces Western individualist ontology. It assumes bounded individuals who develop capacities through intentional practice, treating the self as fundamentally autonomous, knowledge as primarily cognitive, and development as linear progress. When examined through Aboriginal epistemologies—particularly concepts of gurrutu (kinship systems), Ways of Knowing/Being/Doing, co-becoming with Country, and the Ganma metaphor—these assumptions appear not as universal truths but as culturally specific choices with profound implications.

## Foundational tensions

Aboriginal ontology begins with relationship as prior to the individual. Persons are constituted through kinship webs extending through space and time, connecting humans with more-than-human entities, ancestors, and descendants. The self is not something one develops but something that emerges through right relationship. This creates fundamental tensions with the IDG's emphasis on individual interior cultivation, competence accumulation, and progressive development.

Temporal ontologies also differ radically. The IDG assumes linear progress from less to more capable states. Aboriginal epistemologies understand time as cyclical and regenerative, emphasizing ongoing participation in eternal patterns rather than development toward completion. Knowledge in Aboriginal frameworks is emplaced—inseparable from specific Country, distributed across communities, held by land itself—rather than portable skills individuals accumulate.

## What each framework reveals

Indigenous epistemologies reveal the IDG's blind spots: its participation in industrial logic treating humans as resources to optimize, its testimony to modern alienation (that "Connectedness" needs teaching reveals how thoroughly colonial capitalism has fragmented persons from relationship), its universalizing gesture that erases radical difference, and its significant exclusions—ceremony, ancestors, spirits, more-than-human teachers, patient listening, and cyclical regeneration.

The IDG framework, conversely, reveals pragmatic challenges in Indigenous-settler relations: the accessibility problem (Aboriginal epistemologies can appear difficult to operationalize within Western institutions), translation difficulties, urgency tensions (global crises seem to demand rapid response while fundamental transformation requires generations), and Indigenous peoples' complex navigation of colonial institutional realities.

## Possibilities and limits

Genuinely relational development would center place and Country, prioritize collective restoration over individual building, focus on healing colonial damage rather than developing new capacities, distribute rather than accumulate knowledge, embody reciprocity structurally, honor ceremony as essential, and value waiting and listening as much as action.

However, some differences between frameworks are finally irreconcilable—not problems to solve but realities to respect. Individual versus relational ontology, linear versus cyclical temporality, portable versus emplaced knowledge—these represent fundamentally incomepatible worldviews. The Ganma metaphor's insistence that fresh and salt water remain distinct even as they mix offers guidance: genuine engagement requires maintaining differences rather than forcing synthesis.

## Reframing "saving the world"

Perhaps the deepest difference lies in what "saving the world" means. The IDG assumes the world needs saving by competent humans developing capacities to address crises. Aboriginal epistemologies suggest the world has never needed human rescue—Country has maintained itself across deep time. Current crises reflect broken relationship, not insufficient competence. The work is not developing ourselves to save the world but restoring communities to right participation in patterns that have always sustained life.

This reorientation—from separate self to relational being, from competence to obligation, from saving to restoring, from individual to collective—cannot be trained through the logic that created separation. It requires transformation at depths that Western frameworks can point toward but Aboriginal epistemologies embody: remembering we are not discrete individuals but strands in an infinite web of relationship, participating in patterns larger than any framework, healing through restored relationship with all our relations.

# Preface

This essay was written by the AI language model Claude, based on instructions and source material provided by me, Thomas Jordan. The source material was ten articles, papers and other texts on Australian aboriginal meaning-making systems around knowledge, relationships and pedagogy. I started out with an article (by Martin and Mirraboopa, see the reference list) that was recommended to me in a LinkedIn thread, and then asked ChatGPT to find similar sources, suitable as starting points for this essay writing project. These sources were uploaded to a Claude project, along with a pdf about the updated Inner Development Guide from 2025, and an earlier essay with a similar purpose and structure.

I then asked Claude to write a synopsis for an essay applying aboriginal perspectives on the IDG framework. The resulting synopsis looked promising, so in steps I asked Claude to write each section. I had to ask for revised versions a couple of times for various reasons, but the process was generally smooth.

I want to emphasize that the author of this essay is Claude, not me. Claude is a language model, with a very sophisticated "ability" to apply a complex set of discourse to a new task. But of course this mode of operating has important limitations. The result is something that looks like deductive reasoning, where Claude took one interpretation of a discourse and applied it to a specific topic, the IDG framework. This should be kept in mind, and the reader should use his or her own critical judgement in evaluating the validity of the reasoning and conclusions in the essay.

From my point of view, the resulting essay certainly is a meaningful commentary on the IDG framework. I myself lack the familiarity with the field to assess the degree of authenticity of how aboriginal meaning-making is represented.

Gothenburg, Sweden, November 2025

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## A Critical Examination of the Inner Development Goals through Aboriginal Ways of Knowing

*Claude [AI] with instructions and source material provided by Thomas Jordan*

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# INTRODUCTION: TWO ONTOLOGIES OF "SAVING THE WORLD"

In 2021, a remarkable collaborative effort produced the Inner Development Goals framework—a comprehensive inventory of 25 skills and qualities deemed essential for addressing complex global challenges, particularly those articulated in the UN's Sustainable Development Goals.[1] The framework emerged from extensive consultation with over 20,000 practitioners, leaders, and researchers, representing a genuine attempt to identify what we need to cultivate within ourselves to become more effective agents of positive change in the world. Organized into five dimensions—*Being, Thinking, Relating, Collaborating*, and *Acting*—the IDG framework has proven valuable precisely because it makes visible what has long been invisible in our approaches to sustainability and social change. It articulates what its creators call the "blind spot" in efforts to create a sustainable global society: we have accumulated extensive knowledge about environmental problems, social challenges, and economic inequities, yet we have invested far less in understanding and developing the inner capacities of those who must address these challenges.

The framework speaks a language that resonates across sectors and cultures. Who could argue against cultivating self-awareness, complexity awareness, empathy and compassion, or an inner compass aligned with serving the good of the whole? The IDG offers accessible terminology, clear developmental pathways, and practical application possibilities that make it appealing to organizational leaders, policymakers, educators, and practitioners who might otherwise dismiss inner development as too abstract or peripheral to the urgent work at hand. In a world crying out for transformation, the IDG framework provides a roadmap that appears both comprehensive and actionable.

Yet when we examine this framework through the lenses of Aboriginal and Indigenous epistemologies—particularly the Australian Aboriginal concepts of gurrutu (kinship systems), Ways of Knowing/Being/Doing, co-becoming with Country, and the Ganma metaphor of two-way knowledge—something unexpected emerges. The tensions that arise are not merely about which skills matter most, or how to prioritize development efforts, or even about cultural appropriateness in applying the framework across diverse contexts. Rather, these tensions reach down to the ontological bedrock: fundamental assumptions about what a person is, what development means, how transformation happens, and what it means to "save the world" in the first place.

[1] For further information, see innerdevelopmentgoals.org

Consider the quality of "Connectedness," defined in the IDG framework as "feeling a sense of belonging to a larger whole, such as humanity, the planet's web of life, and the spiritual dimensions of existence." This seems to resonate deeply with Indigenous worldviews often characterized by holistic connection to land, community, and the more-than-human world. But Aboriginal ontologies don't begin with a separate self who then develops a feeling of connection to a larger whole. They begin with relationship as ontologically prior to the individual. In the Yolŋu concept of gurrutu, everything—humans, animals, plants, rocks, winds, songs, ceremonies, places—exists in kinship relationship from the beginning. There is no separate "I" who then learns to feel connected; there is only the relational web within which particular forms of personhood emerge. As Karen Martin writes in her framework of Ways of Knowing, Being, and Doing, "We are part of the world as much as it is part of us, existing within a network of relations amongst Entities that are reciprocal."

This is not a semantic difference but an ontological one. The IDG framework assumes a bounded individual who possesses or cultivates capacities. Even its most relational qualities—Connectedness, Humility, Empathy and Compassion—are framed as attributes of individuals who develop them through practice and experience. Aboriginal epistemologies, by contrast, understand persons as constituted by relationships, not as autonomous agents who enter into relationships. The very structure of the IDG—identifying gaps in individual capacity and developing skills to fill those gaps—emerges from and reinforces a particular Western ontological stance characterized by separation, individuated development, and instrumental competence-building.

Or consider the framework's temporal assumptions. The IDG presents development as progressive movement toward greater capability: individuals begin with less awareness, complexity understanding, and collaborative skill, and through intentional practice they develop more. This linear developmental logic sits uneasily with Aboriginal temporal ontologies that are cyclical, recursive, and regenerative. In gurrutu's patterns, a grandmother becomes a mother becomes a daughter becomes a grandmother again in infinite cycle—not linear progress but eternal return. The Bawaka Country collective, in their collaborative work on place and co-becoming, describe how "the daughter of a granddaughter is a mother. The little baby is a mother of an old woman." Knowledge and capacity don't accumulate in individuals moving forward through time; they circulate through generations and Country in patterns that have always existed and will continue. As Tyson Yunkaporta provocatively suggests in Sand Talk, "the world doesn't actually need us to 'save' it. The planet and Life-as-such have navigated collapse and regeneration many times. What needs changing are the patterns of relationship that make our current civilization destructive and fragile."

This points to perhaps the deepest tension: the IDG framework, despite its emphasis on serving the good of the whole, remains fundamentally anthropocentric in its logic. It assumes that humans—specifically, humans with developed inner capacities—will save the world through more skillful action. Aboriginal ontologies recognize that the world has never needed saving by humans. Country has always known how to maintain balance. Human role is not to save but to maintain right relationship, to fulfill obligations, to listen to what Country teaches. When Mary Graham writes about the philosophical underpinnings of Aboriginal worldviews, she describes how Western society's "discrete individual whirling in space, completely free" experiences "deepest spiritual loneliness and alienation" that drives the need to conquer and own land. The impulse to "save the world" may itself emerge from this foundational separation—the heroic individual attempting to rescue what it feels fundamentally disconnected from.

Yet to frame this essay as purely critical misses something important. The IDG framework has emerged from genuine concern about global crises and sincere effort to address them. Its creators recognize that technical solutions alone won't suffice—that transformation requires inner work, relational capacity, and wisdom alongside strategic action. The framework's five dimensions touch on profound aspects of human experience and collective challenge. Its accessibility has opened conversations about inner development in contexts where more abstract philosophical or spiritual frameworks would gain no traction. And critically, the IDG emerged through broad consultation attempting to honor diverse perspectives and experiences, even if the final synthesis bears marks of its Western origins.

Moreover, Indigenous communities and peoples live within the realities of colonial nation-states, global capitalism, and institutional structures that operate according to Western logics. Having a shared framework for discussing inner development may enable Indigenous participation in spaces that otherwise exclude relational epistemologies. The Ganma metaphor, developed by Yolŋu people to describe engagement between Indigenous and non-Indigenous knowledge systems, suggests that fresh water and salt water can meet and mix while each maintains its distinctiveness. The foam created at their meeting represents new knowledge emerging from genuine engagement. Perhaps the IDG represents "salt water" that, if approached with epistemic humility, could engage with Indigenous "fresh water" knowledge without claiming to replace or represent it.

This essay examines the IDG framework through Aboriginal and Indigenous epistemological lenses with the aim of productive dialogue rather than dismissive critique. The goal is neither to defend the IDG against charges of Western bias nor to replace it wholesale with Indigenous frameworks, but rather to illuminate what becomes visible when we examine assumptions usually invisible within any single worldview. By bringing Aboriginal concepts of gurrutu, Ways of Knowing/Being/Doing, co-becoming with Country, and two-way knowledge into conversation with the IDG's 25 skills and qualities, we can explore several crucial questions:

What does "development" mean when we shift from autonomous individuals to relational persons as the fundamental unit? How do concepts like Inner Compass, Self-Awareness, and Complexity Awareness transform when understood through relational ontology? Which tensions between frameworks represent productive creative friction and which represent incommensurable differences that should be respected rather than resolved? Where might genuine complementarities exist—places where the frameworks illuminate each other's possibilities rather than simply contradicting each other? And perhaps most importantly, what does it reveal about both frameworks when we ask: whose ways of knowing guide our efforts to address global crises, and what difference does this make?

The essay proceeds in four parts. **Part I** establishes foundational tensions between the IDG's individuated competence-building approach and Aboriginal relational ways of knowing, being, and doing. We examine how ontology shapes epistemology—how assumptions about the nature of persons and reality fundamentally structure what "development" can mean. **Part II** takes selected IDG dimensions and qualities and explores how they appear when viewed through Indigenous lenses, revealing both profound tensions and unexpected resonances. **Part III** steps back to consider what each framework reveals about the other—how Indigenous epistemologies illuminate the IDG's blind spots and cultural specificity, and how the IDG's practical orientation reveals both possibilities and challenges in Indigenous-settler knowledge relations. Finally, **Part IV** explores constructive possibilities while respecting limits: what might genui-

nely relational development look like, and where should we accept that frameworks cannot and should not be synthesized?

Throughout, this essay draws primarily on Australian Aboriginal frameworks, particularly Karen Martin's Ways of Knowing/Being/Doing, the Bawaka Country collective's work on gurrutu and co-becoming, Tyson Yunkaporta's exploration of Indigenous pattern thinking, Mary Graham's philosophical analysis of Aboriginal worldviews, and the Ganma metaphor for two-way knowledge engagement. These are not presented as representing all Indigenous epistemologies—a profound diversity exists across Indigenous peoples globally—but as specific, grounded frameworks that offer rich resources for examining Western developmental assumptions.

The aim is not to claim that Indigenous ways of knowing are superior to Western frameworks, nor that the IDG should somehow incorporate Indigenous perspectives to become more legitimate. Rather, this essay works from the premise that genuine engagement across epistemological difference can benefit all parties—not by erasing difference but by allowing each framework to reveal what the other cannot see about itself. The IDG framework has much to offer in navigating Western institutional contexts and providing accessible language for inner development. Aboriginal and Indigenous epistemologies offer ancient and ongoing wisdom about right relationship, collective wellbeing, and regenerative patterns of living that industrial civilization desperately needs to learn. The question is whether these can genuinely engage—salt water and fresh water meeting and mixing while each retains its integrity—or whether the structural power of colonial knowledge systems will inevitably turn engagement into appropriation.

This essay is written with epistemic humility about what can be accomplished through analysis alone. Words on a page cannot restore right relationship with Country, cannot heal colonial wounds, cannot replace the work of listening to Elders and learning from land. But perhaps careful thinking about how we frame "inner development" and "saving the world" can contribute something useful: making visible the assumptions that structure our efforts, honoring genuine difference where it exists, and opening space for transformation that goes deeper than acquiring new skills—transformation in how we understand what we are and how we belong to this more-than-human world that has never needed saving but always requires right relationship.

With this in mind, we turn now to examine the foundational tensions between individuated and relational ontologies, and what these reveal about the very concept of inner development.

# Part I: Foundational Tensions - Ontology Shapes Epistemology

## 1. THE RELATIONAL SELF VERSUS THE INDIVIDUATED COMPETENT SELF

### The IDG's assumption of the bounded individual

When the Inner Development Goals framework presents its first dimension, "Being," it does so with a particular understanding of what a being is. The dimension focuses on "cultivating our inner life" and includes qualities such as Inner Compass, Integrity and Authenticity, Openness and Learning Mindset, Self-awareness, and Presence. Each of these capacities assumes an interior psychological space—an "inner life" that can and should be cultivated, examined, and developed. This assumption, so natural within Western psychological frameworks that it typically goes unnoticed, marks a profound ontological commitment: the person is fundamentally a bounded individual possessing an interior self that can be worked upon, improved, and made more competent.

Aboriginal ontology begins from a radically different premise. Karen Martin, writing from her Quandamooka worldview, describes what she calls Ways of Being: "We are part of the world as much as it is part of us, existing within a network of relations amongst Entities that are reciprocal and occur in certain contexts. This determines and defines for us rights to be earned and bestowed as we carry out rites to country, self and others." Note the structure of this statement. There is no autonomous self who then enters into relationships with the world. Rather, being itself is constituted by these reciprocal relations. Personhood emerges through relationship with Country, ancestors, kin both human and more-than-human, and the spiritual systems that structure existence.

### Gurrutu: kinship as ontological structure

The Yolŋu concept of gurrutu illuminates this relational ontology with particular clarity. Gurrutu is the complex kinship system that underlies all relationships in, around, and with Bawaka Country in northeast Arnhem Land. Everything in the Yolŋu cosmos—humans, animals, plants, rocks, winds, songs, ceremonies, places, spirits—is either Yirritja or Dhuwa, the two fundamental moieties that together make up the universe. Everything is also related through the yothu-yindi (mother-child) relationship. The child of a Yirritja mother is Dhuwa. The child of a Dhuwa mother is Yirritja. If a person is Yirritja and a rock is Yirritja, that rock is their sister. A choppy water that is Dhuwa would be their mother or child. Places are related in mother-child relationships that recur throughout the Yolŋu homelands.

As the Bawaka Country collective writes in their collaborative work, "Gurrutu is what makes humans and more-than-humans what they are. It brings with it specific responsibilities, questions of governance, and rules for living, of Rom. Everything fits and makes a whole in an incredibly complex, everlasting web." This is not metaphor or poetry but ontological description. A person becomes who they are through gurrutu. Their identity is not something they

possess individually but something that emerges through patterns of relationship that extend infinitely in all directions—to ancestors who came before, to descendants not yet born, to Country itself, to the spirits and entities that co-constitute place.

## What this means for Self-awareness

When we bring this understanding to the IDG's "Being" dimension, the tensions become apparent. Take Self-awareness, defined as "ability to be in reflective contact with thoughts, emotions, desires, and actions; to maintain a realistic self-image and to regulate oneself." From the perspective of relational ontology, several questions arise: Which self is being made aware? The self as understood through gurrutu—as grandmother, mother, daughter, sister, connected to this Country and these spirits and these obligations? Or the self as individual psychological entity with interior thoughts and emotions? What constitutes a "realistic self-image" when the self is fundamentally relational rather than individual? And what does "self-regulation" mean when behavior is properly regulated not primarily through individual willpower but through kinship obligations and collective accountability?

Martin makes this explicit when describing Aboriginal selfhood: "Our Ways of Being evolve as contexts change. For instance, relations change amongst people at particular times, such as movement from one life stage to another, or with the birth or death of a member. Relations amongst Entities are also affected in the same way." Identity is not a stable interior possession but an evolving pattern of relationships. When a community member dies, relationships shift throughout the entire kinship network. When a child is born, new kinship positions emerge for everyone connected. The self is not separate from these shifting patterns of relationship; it is constituted by them.

This has profound implications for how we understand what IDG calls "developing" inner capacities. From an Aboriginal perspective, the work is not primarily about cultivating an individual interior life but about maintaining right relationship within the kinship web. Mary Graham articulates this when she writes about how Aboriginal cultures transcend ego and possessiveness: "A collective responsibility to land is vital if people are even to attempt to transcend ego and possessions; the point is that land always comes before ego and possessions." The IDG's emphasis on individual inner development, however well-intentioned, may actually reinforce the very ego-centricity that needs to be transcended. By focusing attention on "my" self-awareness, "my" inner compass, "my" presence, the framework can inadvertently strengthen the boundaries of the separate self rather than revealing its relational nature.

## Inner Compass: internal guide or kinship obligations?

Yet there is a nuance here worth attending to. In the original development of the IDG framework, before it was simplified for mass communication, the author categorized the 25 qualities into five distinct types. Three qualities—Connectedness, Inner Compass, and Humility—were placed in a category called "Identifications," defined as "referring to core identity, what a person feels he or she fundamentally is." The framework's creator recognized that these are "not skills that can be trained but rather expressions of how identity itself is structured." This suggests an implicit recognition that some of what the IDG framework addresses touches on ontological questions of identity rather than mere skill development.

When we examine Inner Compass, defined as "a deeply felt commitment to live and act in accordance with values and purposes that serve the good of the whole," we can see both the

tension and a possible point of contact. From an Aboriginal perspective, the "compass" is gurrutu itself—the kinship obligations that constitute personhood. One doesn't develop an inner compass; one learns to listen to and fulfill the obligations one is born into. These obligations are not internal to the individual but external—though "external" is the wrong word, because the distinction between interior and exterior dissolves when the self is relational. The obligations are woven into the very structure of who one is.

Graham describes this elegantly: "When the Aboriginal child learns to share, he or she is given food and then invited to give it back; social obligations are pointed out and possessiveness gently discouraged." The child is being taught not to develop an internal value of sharing but to recognize and participate in patterns of reciprocity that precede them. The "compass" is not inside the individual but in the structure of relationships that makes the individual possible. Yet the IDG's language of "deeply felt commitment" and "serving the good of the whole" gestures toward something beyond mere self-interest, suggesting that even within individualist ontology, there is recognition that identity can extend to include larger wholes.

## The developmental perspective: achievement versus ground of being

This points to a crucial distinction. The IDG framework, particularly in its higher developmental expressions, moves toward what it calls "worldcentric consciousness"—identity that extends beyond personal and cultural boundaries to include all humans, future generations, and the more-than-human world. In the essay on ego development stages that examines IDG qualities through vertical development, the autonomous stage (E8) is described as achieving "systemic inclusion" where "the boundary between self and system becomes permeable. What happens to the system is experienced as happening to oneself, not because of moral identification but because the person recognizes themselves as constituted by their relationships and context."

This is remarkably close to Aboriginal relational ontology. The difference, subtle but profound, is that Western developmental frameworks present this as an achievement—something reached through stages of growth from earlier, more bounded forms of selfhood. Aboriginal ontology presents it as the ground of being from which one should never have departed. The work is not to develop toward relational consciousness but to remember and maintain it, to resist the forces of colonialism and capitalism that attempt to fragment persons into isolated individuals.

## Pedagogical implications: developing connection or removing barriers?

The pedagogical implications are significant. The IDG framework suggests developing qualities like Connectedness through practices, experiences, and learning. One might use mindfulness meditation to cultivate presence, perspective-taking exercises to build empathy, systems thinking tools to develop complexity awareness. These are genuine practices with demonstrable effects. But from an Aboriginal perspective, the deeper work might be removing the barriers to experiencing what has always been true. As Yunkaporta notes, trying to "feel connected" while maintaining extractive, dominance-based relationships with land is cognitive dissonance. The issue isn't lack of connection practices but the ongoing violence of disconnection.

Martin writes that "Our Ways of Being shape our Ways of Doing"—behavior flows from ontology. If one's being is fundamentally relational, embedded in networks of reciprocal obligation with Country and kin, then certain ways of doing naturally emerge. You don't need to develop empathy for the river if the river is your mother or grandmother. You don't need to

cultivate humility if you understand yourself as one small strand in an infinite kinship web. These aren't qualities you possess but expressions of who you are.

## A necessary caveat: avoiding romanticization

Yet we must be careful not to romanticize or essentialize. Aboriginal peoples are as diverse and complex as any human communities, experiencing the full range of human challenges. And contemporary Aboriginal people navigate colonial realities that have profoundly disrupted traditional ways of being. The observation here is not that Indigenous peoples automatically embody all the qualities the IDG framework seeks to develop, but rather that the ontological ground from which Aboriginal epistemologies emerge offers a fundamentally different understanding of what persons are and how transformation happens.

## Implications for the IDG framework

This raises uncomfortable questions for the IDG framework. If the very structure of identifying individual gaps and developing individual competencies reinforces individualist ontology, can it genuinely lead to the relational consciousness it claims to value? If Connectedness is framed as something an individual possesses rather than the ground of being, does developing it actually deepen separation? If the framework treats transformation as primarily an individual project, does it inadvertently perpetuate the isolation it seeks to overcome?

There may be no simple resolution to these tensions. Perhaps the IDG framework, emerging from and serving Western institutional contexts, must work within individualist ontology even as it gestures toward transcending it. Perhaps it represents a transitional stage—useful for people shaped by Western education and culture, helping them move toward more relational consciousness even if it can't fully embody that consciousness in its own structure. Or perhaps the framework needs fundamental reconception if it genuinely seeks to serve global transformation rather than merely making individuals more competent within existing systems.

What becomes clear through this examination is that the "Being" dimension of the IDG cannot be separated from the question of ontology. Who is doing the being? What is the nature of this being? These aren't merely philosophical abstractions but practical questions that shape every aspect of how development work proceeds, who has authority to guide it, and what transformation ultimately means.

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# 2. CO-BECOMING VERSUS LINEAR DEVELOPMENT

## The IDG's progressive logic

The Inner Development Goals framework is fundamentally progressive in structure. It assumes movement from less to more: less aware to more aware, less complex to more complex, less connected to more connected, less skillful to more skillful. While the framework doesn't explicitly articulate developmental stages, its very logic implies improvement over time through intentional practice. One identifies where one currently stands with respect to the 25 qualities, recognizes gaps or areas for growth, and undertakes practices, training, or experiences designed to develop greater capacity. This is the familiar logic of Western education, professional development, and self-improvement: assess, set goals, practice, measure progress, repeat.

## Cyclical regeneration in Aboriginal temporality

Aboriginal epistemologies operate according to a radically different temporal ontology. Rather than linear progress, they emphasize cyclical regeneration. Rather than individual development, they describe co-becoming with Country and kin. Rather than moving toward something not yet achieved, they attend to maintaining patterns that have always existed and must continue. The Bawaka Country collective articulates this with particular power in their description of gurrutu's recursive patterns: "The daughter of a granddaughter is a mother. The little baby is a mother of an old woman. Here then, is an infinite pattern. A Yolŋu woman is a grandmother, a mother, an aunty. It doesn't matter how old she is, whether she physically has children, she is connected and a relative to someone else, to everyone else."

This is not metaphorical language but description of how time and identity actually work within Aboriginal ontology. The grandmother-mother-daughter pattern doesn't progress linearly from old to young but cycles eternally. Any one person occupies multiple positions simultaneously—grandmother to some, mother to others, daughter to still others. And these positions extend through time in ways that Western linear temporality cannot easily accommodate. A person has mothers and grandmothers and daughters reaching back through ancestors and forward through descendants not yet born. The pattern precedes any individual and will continue after them.

## Learning as participation, not accumulation

When Martin describes Ways of Knowing, she emphasizes that "The time of learning in the Aboriginal world never stops. It goes on and on." But this ongoing learning is not progressive accumulation where one becomes more knowledgeable over time in a simple additive sense. Rather, learning involves deepening participation in patterns and relationships that have always been there. Knowledge is distributed across the community and Country itself. As Martin writes, "no one person or Entity knows all, but each has sets of knowledges to fulfil particular roles. These roles are gender specific and directed by life stage." What counts as knowledge appropriate for one person changes as they move through life stages, but this movement is not progress toward complete individual knowledge. It is shifting participation in collective knowing distributed across generations, genders, and relationships with Country.

## Co-becoming with Country

The Bawaka collective describes this as co-becoming: "Bawaka, as space/place, as Country, becomes through a relational ontology just as a relational ontology becomes through Bawaka, through digging and the ganguri and the sand." When women dig for ganguri (yams) at Bawaka, they are not developing individual skills in yam harvesting. They are participating in relationships with Country, with the yams themselves, with ancestors who dug here before, with children who watch and learn, with the season and the sand and the digging sticks. Through this participation, persons and place co-become. The women are shaped by the digging even as their digging shapes the land. The yams teach even as they are harvested. Knowledge emerges through the relationship, not as information transferred from environment to individual mind.

This co-becoming has a profoundly different temporal structure than development. As the Bawaka collective writes, "We, Bawaka and the humans and the ganguri, will never be the same again" after a day of digging. Everything has changed—the women's bodies are older, the sand has been moved, some ants have died while others are born, the tree has shed leaves and thickened roots. But this constant change is not progress toward a goal. It is participation in the ongoing becoming of place and persons together. There is no endpoint where one has fully developed the capacity to dig yams. There is only continuing relationship that constantly transforms all parties.

## Pattern thinking and the Dreaming

Yunkaporta offers another angle on this through his exploration of Aboriginal pattern thinking. Rather than seeing time as linear progression, Aboriginal logic recognizes patterns that recur cyclically. The seasons return, not as repetition but as regeneration. The ceremonies are performed again, not as historical reenactment but as renewed participation in patterns that connect ancestors, present community, and descendants. Creation is not something that happened in the past but is ongoing—the Dreaming is not a dreamtime that was but a continuing reality that gives rise to the present moment.

## Transformation through participation, not capacity-building

This creates a profoundly different understanding of what "developing inner capacities" might mean. From the IDG perspective, one might spend years cultivating self-awareness through meditation practices, developing complexity awareness through studying systems thinking, building empathy through perspective-taking exercises. The assumption is that with sustained effort, one becomes more capable—possessing qualities one previously lacked or possessed to a lesser degree.

From an Aboriginal perspective, the relevant question is not "How do I develop these capacities?" but rather "How do I participate rightly in the patterns that have always sustained life?" The capacities needed to live well are not absent, requiring development, but are embedded in the relationships one is already part of. The work is not acquisition but attention—listening to what Country teaches, observing how Elders fulfill their roles, learning the stories and songs that carry knowledge across generations.

Martin describes how Aboriginal knowledge is "taught and learned in certain contexts, in certain ways at certain times. It is therefore purposeful, only to the extent to which it is used. If it is not used, then it is not necessary." This is strikingly different from the IDG framework's

implication that individuals should develop all 25 qualities regardless of their specific role or context. In Aboriginal epistemology, different people need different knowledge according to their life stage, gender, and relationships. A young person doesn't need the knowledge appropriate to Elders. Women's knowledge differs from men's knowledge. What one needs to know is determined by one's position within the kinship web and one's responsibilities to Country.

The contrast extends to how transformation is understood to happen. The IDG framework, influenced by Western psychological and educational models, emphasizes individual agency in development. One chooses to work on particular qualities, selects practices to pursue, monitors one's progress. Even when the framework recognizes that growth happens through challenge and relationship, the locus remains the individual who is developing.

Aboriginal epistemologies locate transformation in the relationships themselves. One doesn't develop individually and then act more effectively in the world. Rather, one participates more fully in the relationships that constitute being, and through this participation, one is transformed. The Bawaka collective writes about gurrutu that "Through gurrutu bonds of kinship are performed, they are practiced in ways that confer certain rights, responsibilities, behaviours and affections." Transformation happens through doing what the relationship requires, not through prior individual capacity-building.

## Long-term orientation as lived reality, not developed skill

This has significant implications for understanding qualities like what the IDG calls "Long-term Orientation and Visioning"—the capacity to consider long time horizons and future consequences in one's decisions and actions. The IDG framework treats this as an individual cognitive skill that can be developed through practices like scenario planning, futures thinking, and expanding one's temporal perspective. But in Aboriginal ontology, deep time connection is not a skill but a reality. One's decisions are already accountable to ancestors and future generations because they are present in the kinship relationships that constitute one's being.

As Martin writes, ancestors and descendants are part of one's Ways of Being: "Where once our Ways of Being were exercised within our country and with other known groups, since colonisation we engage often with many Aboriginal people and groups... we immediately set about establishing identities, interests and connections to determine our relatedness." The work is not developing capacity to think long-term but fulfilling obligations to relationships that extend through time. One makes decisions considering seven generations not because one has trained oneself to think that far ahead but because those seven generations are one's mothers, grandmothers, daughters, and granddaughters.

## Change as relational adaptation, not static tradition

Yet here we must note an important caveat. The cyclical, relational temporality of Aboriginal epistemology should not be romanticized as if Indigenous peoples live outside of historical change. Aboriginal communities have experienced profound disruption through colonization, dispossession, and ongoing violence. Ways of knowing, being, and doing have had to adapt to catastrophic change. Martin acknowledges this directly: "Although our worlds are now historically, socially and politically imbued with features of western worldviews and constructs, we never relinquished, nor lost the essence of, our Ways of Knowing and Ways of Being, and this is reflected in our Ways of Doing."

The point is not that Aboriginal temporality is somehow static while Western temporality is dynamic. Rather, the nature of change itself is understood differently. Change happens through participation in ongoing patterns of relationship rather than through individual progress toward predetermined goals. Resilience and adaptation occur through maintaining relational connections even as specific practices must shift. And crucially, knowledge about how to navigate change is held collectively and distributed across the community rather than located primarily in individual competence.

## Questions for the IDG's developmental logic

This raises challenging questions for the IDG framework's developmental logic. If transformation happens through co-becoming in relationship rather than individual capacity-building, what does it mean to "develop inner goals"? If the relevant knowledge is distributed across community and embedded in place rather than accumulated in individuals, how should development work be structured? If temporal patterns are cyclical and regenerative rather than progressive, what becomes of the notion of moving toward greater capability?

## The growth problem

There may be practical value in the IDG's developmental approach within Western institutional contexts that operate according to linear temporality and individual accountability. Organizations need frameworks that work within quarterly reporting cycles, individual performance reviews, and project-based timelines. The IDG provides this. But we should recognize this as accommodation to Western temporal structures rather than universal truth about how humans develop and transform.

Moreover, the IDG's progressive developmental logic may inadvertently reinforce precisely the orientation toward endless growth and accumulation that drives ecological crisis. If the framework teaches that one should always be developing more capacity, gaining more awareness, expanding more capability, it mirrors the capitalist imperative of constant growth. Aboriginal cyclical temporality, by contrast, emphasizes maintenance and regeneration rather than expansion. The work is not to develop more but to continue participating rightly in patterns that sustain life.

Yunkaporta makes this point sharply when he observes that the question isn't how to make ourselves more competent to save the world. "The world doesn't actually need us to 'save' it," he writes. "What needs changing are the patterns of relationship that make our current civilization destructive and fragile." The IDG framework, with its emphasis on developing individual human capacities, may miss that the fundamental problem is not insufficient human competence but destructive patterns of relationship—with each other, with land, with the more-than-human world. Developing more skilled individuals might only make us more efficient at perpetuating those destructive patterns.

The alternative suggested by Aboriginal epistemologies is not abandoning all notion of learning and growth but grounding it differently. Rather than individuals developing toward completion, communities maintain relationships through which appropriate knowledge emerges. Rather than linear progress, cyclical return to patterns that have sustained life across deep time. Rather than accumulating capacities, fulfilling obligations. Rather than building toward a future where we save the world, participating in the world's ongoing regeneration through right relationship.

Whether these two temporal orientations—progressive development and cyclical co-becoming—can genuinely be integrated remains an open question. Perhaps they serve different purposes in different contexts. Perhaps the IDG's developmental framework helps individuals shaped by Western temporality move toward recognition of cyclical patterns. Or perhaps the tension is finally irreconcilable, representing fundamentally different ontologies that must be respected in their distinctiveness rather than reconciled.

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# 3. WAYS OF KNOWING: EMBODIED, EMPLACED, COLLECTIVE VERSUS COGNITIVE ABSTRACTION

## The IDG's cognitive emphasis

The Inner Development Goals framework's second dimension, "Thinking," addresses how we understand and make sense of our complex world. The dimension includes qualities such as Complexity Awareness, Perspective Skills, Sense-making, Critical Thinking, and Long-term Orientation and Visioning. These capacities are primarily cognitive—ways of processing information, analyzing situations, holding multiple perspectives, and reasoning about complex systems. The underlying assumption is that developing these thinking skills will enable more effective engagement with global challenges.

## Aboriginal Ways of Knowing: relational and embodied

Aboriginal epistemologies offer a radically different understanding of what knowing is and how it happens. Martin's framework of Ways of Knowing provides entry into this different epistemology. She writes: "Ways of Knowing are specific to ontology and Entities of Land, Animals, Plants, Waterways, Skies, Climate and the Spiritual systems of Aboriginal groups. Knowledge about ontology and Entities is learned and reproduced through processes of: listening, sensing, viewing, reviewing, reading, watching, waiting, observing, exchanging, sharing, conceptualising, assessing, modelling, engaging and applying."

Note what appears in this list and what doesn't. There is observing, but also sensing. There is conceptualizing, but also waiting. There is engaging, but also listening. Knowledge emerges not primarily through cognitive analysis but through embodied engagement with entities that themselves possess agency and knowledge. The land teaches. The animals teach. The waterways, skies, and climate teach. Ancestors and spirits teach. Knowing is not extraction of information from passive environment into active human mind but participatory relationship with entities that have their own knowledge to share.

## Country as knowledge holder and teacher

The Bawaka collective describes this with particular eloquence when they write about how Bawaka itself has author-ity: "We work to bring to the academic world—a world where Indigenous peoples and knowledges are so often ignored, belittled, singularized or made to justify themselves against superior, correct Western ways of knowing—some aspects of Yolŋu ways of knowing and being." Their collaborative work is explicitly authored by Bawaka Country, not just by the human researchers. The place itself is recognized as knower and knowledge-holder, not mere object of study.

## Complexity awareness as living within gurrutu

This understanding of knowledge as relational and distributed fundamentally challenges the IDG framework's emphasis on individual cognitive skills. Complexity awareness, from the IDG perspective, involves developing capacity to hold multiple variables in mind, recognize system dynamics, and understand emergent properties. One might learn systems thinking tools, practice mapping feedback loops, or study complexity science. The knowledge produced is

understood as existing in the individual's mind, even if it describes relationships in the external world.

Aboriginal epistemology locates complexity not in individual cognitive capacity but in the relationships themselves. Gurrutu is a complexity framework—an infinitely intricate web of kinship relations extending through space and time, connecting everything to everything else according to patterns like Yirritja/Dhuwa and yothu-yindi. But this complexity is not something one comprehends abstractly. It is something one lives within and participates in. One's position in gurrutu determines one's responsibilities, rights, and relationships. One doesn't study the system from outside; one enacts one's part within it.

## Knowledge as purposeful and contextual

Martin emphasizes that Aboriginal knowledge is purposeful—"only to the extent to which it is used. If it is not used, then it is not necessary." This contrasts sharply with Western academic knowledge that values abstraction and generalization. Aboriginal knowing is radically contextual and practical. You need to know what is relevant to your role, your life stage, your relationships with specific entities and places. Abstract knowledge divorced from particular relationships and responsibilities may be less valuable than ignorance, because it can lead to inappropriate action.

## The 8 Ways of Aboriginal pedagogy

The 8 Ways of Aboriginal Learning framework articulates this difference pedagogically. Knowledge is transmitted through Story Sharing, not just through rational discourse. It is carried in Learning Maps and Symbols and Images, not just in abstract concepts. It is fundamentally connected to Land Links—you learn in and with specific places. It follows Non-linear patterns rather than sequential curricula. It involves Deconstruct/Reconstruct approaches, working from wholes to parts rather than building up from components. And crucially, it is centered on Community Links, with learning always situated in collective purpose and benefit.

## Critical thinking: whose critique, which conventions?

When we examine the IDG framework's thinking capacities through this lens, significant tensions emerge. Take Critical Thinking, defined as "examining the validity of views, evidence, and plans; willing to challenge convention." From a Western perspective, this is essential for navigating complex challenges—one must question assumptions, evaluate evidence, resist groupthink. But Aboriginal epistemologies might raise different questions: Critical from whose standpoint? Evidence evaluated according to which criteria? Which conventions are subject to challenge and which are sacred?

Martin writes about Aboriginal research methodology: "A researcher's worldview both informs and shapes the assumptions and parameters for undertaking research activity. Within Indigenist research these assumptions are grounded within matters pertaining to the protection and preservation of our country and its Entities and the protection and preservation of our Ways of Knowing, Ways of Being and Ways of Doing." The critical stance here is not abstract evaluation according to universal rational standards but protection and preservation of relationships and responsibilities.

Graham offers philosophical insight into this difference when she discusses Aboriginal logic: "Aboriginal logic is very different to Western logic. Western logic rests on the division between the self and the not-self, the external and the internal." Western critical thinking assumes a thinking subject examining an object of thought, maintaining critical distance to evaluate objectively. Aboriginal logic begins from relationship and connection. The knower is not separate from what is known but participates in it.

## Sense-making as reading Country

This has profound implications for understanding what the IDG calls Sense-making—"making sense of a complex or uncertain situation and using the understanding to guide one's actions." Western sense-making typically involves constructing mental models, creating frameworks for interpretation, developing theories that explain phenomena. Aboriginal sense-making might involve listening to what Country reveals, attending to signs and patterns, consulting with Elders and spirits, participating in ceremony that makes the situation intelligible.

The Bawaka collective describes how "We read it every day, every minute, every moment. We share that knowledge with the children, and now with you, it's a part of us." Reading Country is not metaphorical. It is literal interpretation of signs, patterns, and communications from land, water, plants, animals, seasons, spirits. This reading requires deep knowledge cultivated over lifetimes, held by Elders, distributed across the community. But it is fundamentally different from the individual cognitive sense-making the IDG framework emphasizes.

## Indigenous pattern thinking: five minds working together

Yunkaporta's exploration of Indigenous pattern thinking offers another dimension to this contrast. He describes five "minds" or ways of seeing from Aboriginal perspectives: kinship mind, story mind, dreaming mind, ancestor mind, and pattern mind. These are not developmental stages but modes of engagement that work together. Kinship mind sees everything in webs of obligation and reciprocity. Story mind carries knowledge in narrative embedded in place. Dreaming mind connects to deep time and more-than-human guidance. Ancestor mind maintains accountability across generations. Pattern mind recognizes recurring structures across scales.

None of these modes privilege the kind of abstract analytical thinking emphasized in the IDG's "Thinking" dimension. Knowledge emerges through relationship, story, dream, ancestral connection, and pattern recognition rather than primarily through individual cognitive analysis. This doesn't mean Aboriginal peoples lack analytical capacity—obviously they do complex thinking. But the epistemological frame is different. Thinking is always grounded in relationship with specific entities, places, and communities rather than abstracted into general cognitive skills.

## The Ganma framework: engaging across difference

The framework of Ganma, developed by Yolŋu peoples to describe engagement between Indigenous and non-Indigenous knowledge systems, is instructive here. Ganma refers to places where fresh water and salt water meet and mix. The fresh water and salt water represent parallel systems of knowledge. As the original articulation states: "Strictly speaking, it relates to the separateness of fresh water and salt water knowledge even at the point where they meet and mix. It is like what some [non-Indigenous people] call a 'dialectical' relationship, in which two

opposed patterns of ideas complement, interact and relate to one another, but never lose their distinctiveness as separate and opposed parts of one whole."

This suggests that Indigenous and Western ways of knowing might engage productively without one subsuming the other. The foam created where fresh and salt water mix represents new knowledge emerging from genuine engagement. But critically, the Ganma metaphor insists on maintaining distinctiveness. The waters don't merge into one homogeneous mixture. They remain separate even as they interact.

Applied to the IDG framework's "Thinking" dimension, this means we might appreciate both cognitive analytical skills and embodied emplaced relational knowing without claiming they are the same thing or that one should replace the other. Western complexity science and Aboriginal gurrutu both address complexity but through fundamentally different epistemologies. Systems thinking tools and reading Country both enable sense-making but according to different logics. Critical thinking and protection of sacred knowledge both involve evaluation but from different standpoints.

## The challenge of structural power

The challenge is that structural power typically privileges Western epistemology. In institutional contexts, rational analysis carries more weight than knowledge gained through dreaming. Written reports are valued over oral testimony. Individual expertise trumps collective Elder wisdom. The IDG framework, despite its good intentions, participates in this privileging simply by framing "Thinking" in primarily cognitive analytical terms.

Martin addresses this directly when she discusses Indigenist research methodology: "For Indigenist research to be recognised by the western research academy it must also identify its methodology. But western research is a western practice and, as such, it is not a feature of our own world, so a research framework that is entirely Aboriginal is not possible. So Indigenist research occurs through centring Aboriginal Ways of Knowing, Ways of Being and Ways of Doing in alignment with aspects of western qualitative research frameworks."

The same tension exists with the IDG framework. To be recognized and applied in Western institutional contexts, it must speak Western language, emphasize individual competencies, provide measurable outcomes. But this very necessity may limit its capacity to honor genuinely different epistemologies. The framework can gesture toward holistic understanding, embodied knowing, and collective wisdom, but it cannot fully embody these while remaining legible to Western institutions.

## Navigating practical realities

This raises uncomfortable questions. Can the IDG framework genuinely cultivate what it calls Complexity Awareness if it doesn't recognize gurrutu as a complexity framework at least as sophisticated as Western systems thinking? Can it develop authentic Perspective Skills if it privileges Western rational discourse over Aboriginal story, ceremony, and dream as ways of knowing? Can it enable genuine Sense-making if it doesn't acknowledge that some of the most important knowledge is held by land itself, by ancestors, by more-than-human entities who are not included in human meaning-making?

Yet we must also acknowledge practical realities. The IDG framework serves contexts where Western epistemology dominates and may create openings for more holistic understanding even within those constraints. Moreover, Indigenous communities must navigate Western institutional realities. Having shared frameworks, even imperfect ones, may enable dialogue and collaboration that pure incommensurability would prevent.

The question becomes not whether the IDG framework perfectly honors Aboriginal epistemology—it doesn't and perhaps can't—but whether it can do so respectfully and humbly. This means acknowledging its cultural specificity rather than claiming universality. It means recognizing that other ways of knowing exist that cannot be reduced to its categories. It means deferring to Indigenous authority on Indigenous knowledge rather than attempting to incorporate or improve it.

## What transformation really requires

Most importantly, it means recognizing that "developing thinking skills" may not be the primary work needed to address global crises. If the fundamental problem is broken relationships—with land, with each other, with the more-than-human world—then restoring right relationship may be more urgent than enhancing individual cognitive capacity. Aboriginal epistemologies have sustained peoples and places across tens of thousands of years through catastrophic climate shifts, landscape transformations, and, more recently, colonial violence. This knowledge—embedded in place, held by Elders, enacted through ceremony, maintained across generations—may offer more wisdom for navigating collapse and regeneration than the newest systems thinking tools.

The IDG framework's "Thinking" dimension has value within Western contexts where cognitive skills are the primary currency of influence. But examined through Aboriginal epistemological lenses, it reveals both its cultural specificity and its profound limitations. Genuine engagement with complexity, meaningful sense-making, and authentic understanding may require not developing individual cognitive capacities but learning to participate in knowledge systems that have always known how to live well on this continent and this earth.

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These three sections of Part I establish the foundational ontological and epistemological tensions between the IDG framework and Aboriginal ways of knowing, being, and doing. The tensions are not incidental differences in emphasis but fundamental divergences in understanding what persons are, how knowledge emerges, and what transformation means. Part II will examine specific IDG dimensions and qualities in depth, exploring how they appear when viewed through these Indigenous lenses and where both tensions and complementarities emerge.

# Part II: Examining Selected IDG Dimensions Through Indigenous Lenses

## 4. "BEING" - WHOSE INNER LIFE?

### The cultivation of interiority

The Inner Development Goals framework's first dimension, "Being," is subtitled "Cultivating Our Inner Life." This framing immediately reveals a particular understanding of personhood: there exists an interior psychological space that requires deliberate cultivation. The dimension includes five qualities—Inner Compass, Integrity and Authenticity, Openness and Learning Mindset, Self-awareness, and Presence. Each assumes that the primary site of development work is within the individual's consciousness, and that transformation begins with examining, refining, and strengthening this interior life.

The framework's description states: "Deepening our awareness of inner experiences and their dynamic relationship with the world around us nurtures embodied presence, clarity of purpose, and thoughtful responses when we face complexity." This language of "deepening awareness" and "cultivating inner life" reflects a Western psychological tradition that emerged from particular historical conditions—the rise of individualism, the Protestant emphasis on inner conscience, the development of depth psychology, and the therapeutic culture that treats the self as a project requiring constant work.

Aboriginal ontologies do not reject the existence of interior experience, but they do not privilege it as the primary locus of identity or the central site of transformation. When Martin describes Ways of Being, she emphasizes relationship and obligation rather than interior cultivation: "We are part of the world as much as it is part of us, existing within a network of relations amongst Entities that are reciprocal and occur in certain contexts. This determines and defines for us rights to be earned and bestowed as we carry out rites to country, self and others." Being is fundamentally relational and expressed through what one does in the world—through rites and relationships—rather than through introspective self-examination.

### Inner Compass as gurrutu's guidance

The quality of Inner Compass provides a useful entry point for examining these tensions. The IDG defines it as "a deeply felt commitment to live and act in accordance with values and purposes that serve the good of the whole." This resonates strongly with Indigenous emphasis on collective wellbeing and responsibility to larger wholes. The language of "deeply felt commitment" suggests something more than mere cognitive adherence to principles—it points toward an embodied, affective orientation toward right action.

Yet the very metaphor of a compass reveals the framework's individualist assumptions. A compass is something an individual carries and consults. It provides internal guidance that helps the autonomous person navigate uncertain terrain. The compass belongs to the individual; it is their personal tool for orientation. Even when that compass points toward serving the whole, the framework positions it as an interior capacity that the individual develops and maintains.

From an Aboriginal perspective, what the IDG calls "inner compass" would be understood as gurrutu itself—the kinship structure that determines one's responsibilities and relationships. This "compass" is not inside the individual but in the relational patterns that constitute the world and one's place within it. When a Yolŋu person makes a decision, they are guided by their knowledge of gurrutu—who they are in relation to the people, places, and entities involved, what their obligations are, what their kinship position requires of them. This guidance comes not from consulting an interior compass but from participating in the kinship web that has always structured right relationship.

Graham articulates this when she describes how Aboriginal cultures maintain sharing behavior: "When the Aboriginal child learns to share, he or she is given food and then invited to give it back; social obligations are pointed out and possessiveness gently discouraged." The child is not developing an inner value that they will later consult in making decisions about sharing. They are learning to recognize and participate in the structure of reciprocal obligations that precedes them. The "compass" is the pattern of relationship itself, not something the individual internalizes.

This creates a pedagogical paradox. If we accept the IDG's framing, developing Inner Compass means helping individuals cultivate their capacity to sense what serves the whole and commit to acting accordingly. This might involve values clarification exercises, ethical reflection, meditation practices that connect one to larger purposes, or experiences that reveal interdependence. But if we accept the Aboriginal framing, the work is not developing an interior capacity but learning to recognize and fulfill the obligations embedded in one's relationships. The pedagogy would look entirely different—learning gurrutu patterns, understanding one's kinship position, hearing stories that teach right relationship, participating in ceremony that enacts obligation.

## Integrity and Authenticity: being true to which self?

The quality of Integrity and Authenticity, defined as "a sincere commitment to honesty and firmly grounded values, expressed and embodied in action," presents similar tensions. The Western notion of authenticity assumes there is a "true self" that can be aligned with or betrayed. Being authentic means being true to this inner nature, expressing it honestly, and refusing to compromise it for external demands. Integrity means maintaining consistency between this inner truth and outer action.

But what is this "true self" that one should be authentic to? Western philosophy since at least the Enlightenment has struggled with this question, often landing on some version of the autonomous rational individual whose essential nature precedes social relationships. Contemporary therapeutic and spiritual discourses encourage people to "find themselves," to "be true to who you really are," to "live authentically" by aligning outer life with inner truth.

Aboriginal ontology offers a profoundly different understanding. The self is not something one finds within but something that emerges through relationship. Martin writes: "Our Ways of Being evolve as contexts change. For instance, relations change amongst people at particular times, such as movement from one life stage to another, or with the birth or death of a member." Who one is shifts as relationships shift. There is no stable interior essence that remains constant while relationships change around it. Rather, the person is constituted by those relationships.

This doesn't mean Aboriginal peoples lack integrity or consistency of character. But integrity is not understood as alignment between interior essence and exterior expression. It is understood as properly fulfilling one's obligations within the kinship web, maintaining right relationship with Country and kin, acting in ways that honor the patterns that constitute community. One demonstrates integrity not by being true to an interior self but by being true to one's relationships and responsibilities.

The Bawaka collective describes how "Through gurrutu bonds of kinship are performed, they are practiced in ways that confer certain rights, responsibilities, behaviours and affections." These behaviors and affections are not expressions of a pre-existing interior self; they arise through the practice of kinship itself. Authenticity in this context would mean fully inhabiting one's kinship position, genuinely participating in the relationships that constitute being, rather than performing relationship while remaining internally separate.

## The problem with cultivating openness

The IDG quality of Openness and Learning Mindset—"a curious, adaptive attitude expressed through willingness to exchange perspectives, be vulnerable, welcome change, and grow"—seems at first glance more aligned with Indigenous epistemologies. Aboriginal Ways of Knowing emphasize listening, observing, waiting, and learning from entities throughout one's life. Martin writes that "The time of learning in the Aboriginal world never stops. It goes on and on."

Yet there are subtle but important differences. The IDG frames openness as an individual attitude or mindset that one cultivates. One develops curiosity, practices vulnerability, welcomes change, commits to growth. The emphasis is on the individual's psychological orientation—their willingness to be open rather than closed, flexible rather than rigid, growing rather than static.

Aboriginal learning is not primarily about cultivating psychological openness but about proper relationship with those who hold knowledge. The 8 Ways of Learning framework describes learning through Story Sharing, Land Links, Community Links, and learning from Elders and Country itself. One doesn't primarily develop an open mindset; one learns to listen properly, to observe with full attention, to wait patiently for knowledge to be revealed, to respect the protocols around what can be learned when and by whom.

Moreover, Aboriginal epistemologies recognize that some knowledge is not meant to be shared widely, that some things should remain within specific kinship groups or life stages. Not everything should be open to everyone. Knowledge has proper relationships and boundaries. As Martin emphasizes, knowledge is "taught and learned in certain contexts, in certain ways at certain times. It is therefore purposeful, only to the extent to which it is used." This suggests a more discerning relationship to learning than the Western valorization of openness and growth at all times.

The IDG's emphasis on "willingness to exchange perspectives" assumes a marketplace of ideas where perspectives can be freely shared and compared. But Aboriginal knowledge systems recognize that some knowledge comes with obligations. You cannot simply take a perspective and try it on. Receiving knowledge creates responsibility. Yunkaporta addresses this when he critiques how Indigenous knowledge is often extracted and commodified: "The world doesn't

actually need us to 'save' it... What needs changing are the patterns of relationship that make our current civilization destructive and fragile."

## Self-awareness and the relational person

Self-awareness—"ability to be in reflective contact with thoughts, emotions, desires, and actions; to maintain a realistic self-image and to regulate oneself"—is perhaps the most fundamentally individualist quality in the Being dimension. It assumes a self that can take itself as an object of reflection, that can observe its own thoughts and emotions, that maintains an image of itself, that exercises self-regulation. This is the self of Western psychology, particularly in its cognitive and therapeutic traditions.

The language of "reflective contact with thoughts, emotions, desires, and actions" positions consciousness as split—there is the experiencing self and the observing self, the self that has emotions and the self that reflects on those emotions. This capacity for self-objectification is valued as essential to maturity and wellbeing. One who lacks self-awareness is seen as unreflective, driven by unconscious impulses, unable to choose their responses wisely.

Aboriginal ontology would question whether this kind of self-awareness is the most important form of awareness. When Martin describes Ways of Knowing, she lists "listening, sensing, viewing, reviewing, reading, watching, waiting, observing, exchanging, sharing, conceptualising, assessing, modelling, engaging and applying." There is observing and assessing, but these are directed outward toward entities in relationship rather than inward toward one's own psychological states.

The Bawaka collective's description of digging for ganguri illustrates what awareness looks like in practice: "Throughout the day they spend digging, the dawu tree will shed leaves, its roots will have thickened, green ants will have died, others will be born, the bodies of the women will have gotten a little older, perhaps sickness has set in, the young will have grown. We, Bawaka and the humans and the ganguri, will never be the same again." Awareness here is of the constant co-becoming of all entities—not primarily of one's internal psychological state but of the transformations happening in all relations.

This doesn't mean Aboriginal peoples lack awareness of their internal experiences. But the primary orientation is not toward self-examination and self-regulation. It is toward attending to relationships, recognizing how one affects and is affected by others, understanding one's position within the web of obligations. Graham describes how the Aboriginal child learns sharing through being given food and invited to give it back. The child develops awareness not primarily of their internal desires and impulses but of the relational patterns they are part of and the obligations these create.

## Presence: to what and with whom?

The final quality in the Being dimension is Presence—"capacity to be fully present in the here and now, to accept reality as it unfolds, and to respond in meaningful ways." This quality draws on contemplative and mindfulness traditions that emphasize non-judgmental awareness of present-moment experience. The practice of presence is understood to create space between stimulus and response, enabling more conscious and skillful action.

Aboriginal understanding of presence would emphasize being present to Country, to kin, to ancestors and spirits, to the entities with whom one is in relationship. The Bawaka collective writes: "It is very important for us to walk through the land, to walk together, to see Nature grow by itself, to know there is food for us, waiting. We don't ask someone is the food ready? No, we can see for ourselves, through the cycle of the seasons, the knowledge has been there for thousands of years. We don't read it in a book or paper. We read it every day, every minute, every moment."

This is presence, but not primarily to one's own interior experience. It is presence to what Country is revealing, to what the seasons are teaching, to what is happening in the relationships that constitute this place. The "here and now" is not an abstraction—a moment of pure presence divorced from place and relationship. It is this specific Country at this specific time in the cycle of seasons, with these specific kin, fulfilling these specific obligations.

Moreover, the Aboriginal notion of presence extends beyond the immediate human experience to include ancestors and unborn descendants. Martin describes how "Where once our Ways of Being were exercised within our country and with other known groups, since colonisation we engage often with many Aboriginal people and groups." The present moment contains the past through ancestral presence and the future through obligations to descendants. One is present not just to the immediate sensory experience but to the deep time and kinship relations that this moment participates in.

## Can interior cultivation serve relational being?

The fundamental tension throughout the Being dimension is this: Can cultivating individual interior life genuinely serve relational consciousness, or does the very emphasis on interior development reinforce the separate self that needs to be transcended? The IDG framework's answer seems to be that interior work is necessary preparation for relational engagement—that one must develop self-awareness, presence, and inner compass before one can effectively serve the whole.

Aboriginal epistemologies suggest a different sequence: participation in right relationship develops whatever interior capacities are needed. You don't first cultivate self-awareness and then engage relationally. You participate in kinship obligations, listen to Country, learn from Elders, and through this participation, whatever awareness and presence is needed emerges. The transformation happens through the doing, not as preparation for it.

This has significant implications for practice. The IDG framework suggests development strategies focused on individual interior work: meditation retreats, therapy, contemplative practices, journaling, values clarification exercises. These can be valuable, but Aboriginal epistemologies would emphasize different practices: learning one's kinship position and obligations, spending time on Country, participating in ceremony, hearing and enacting stories, learning from Elders, fulfilling responsibilities to community and land.

The question is whether these different approaches lead to the same destination or fundamentally different forms of consciousness. Is the worldcentric awareness described in Western developmental frameworks essentially the same as the relational consciousness embedded in gurrutu? Or does the path shape the destination in ways that make them ultimately incommensurable?

Perhaps the most honest answer is that we don't know. The IDG framework's Being dimension offers genuine value within Western contexts where people have been profoundly separated from relationship and need practices that work within individualist structures. But Aboriginal epistemologies suggest that genuine transformation might require not just developing interior capacities but fundamentally reconceiving what being itself is—shifting from the bounded individual to the relational person, from interior cultivation to participatory obligation, from finding oneself to enacting one's kinship position within the web of all relations.

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# 5. "RELATING" - ALREADY CONNECTED OR LEARNING TO CONNECT?

## The IDG's developmental approach to connection

The Inner Development Goals framework's third dimension, "Relating," focuses on "Caring for Others and the World." It includes five qualities: Appreciation, Connectedness, Humility, Empathy and Compassion, and Forgiveness. The framework's description states: "Connecting with kindness, compassion, and a sense of shared belonging to communities, the living planet, and future generations helps us to create a more just, inclusive, and flourishing world."

This framing assumes that connection is something that needs to be developed. People begin in a state of relative disconnection—focused on individual concerns, limited in their circle of care—and through intentional practice, they expand their sense of connection to include larger wholes. The dimension is titled "Relating," not "Relationship," emphasizing the active process of connecting rather than the ground of connection itself.

This developmental logic pervades the framework's approach to all five qualities in this dimension. One cultivates appreciation, develops connectedness, practices humility, builds empathy and compassion, learns forgiveness. These are treated as capacities that can grow stronger through training, experience, and practice. The assumption is that humans are not naturally connected to larger wholes; this connection must be created through developmental work.

## Ontological connection versus developed feeling

Aboriginal ontology begins from the opposite premise: everything is already connected through gurrutu. Connection is not something to be developed but the fundamental structure of reality. The work is not creating connection but recognizing, maintaining, and properly enacting the connections that have always existed.

The Bawaka collective articulates this clearly: "Gurrutu is what makes humans and more-than-humans what they are. It brings with it specific responsibilities, questions of governance, and rules for living, of Rom. Everything fits and makes a whole in an incredibly complex, ever-lasting web." This is not a feeling of connection that some individuals have more strongly than others. It is the ontological structure of existence itself. Everything—humans, animals, plants, rocks, winds, songs, ceremonies, places, spirits—is in kinship relationship.

When the IDG framework defines Connectedness as "feeling a sense of belonging to a larger whole, such as humanity, the planet's web of life, and the spiritual dimensions of existence," it frames connection as a subjective feeling that individuals may or may not experience. One person might feel deeply connected to the web of life; another might feel isolated and separate. The development work involves helping more people have the feeling of connection.

But in Aboriginal ontology, connection is not a feeling. It is a fact. Whether or not one feels connected, one is in relationship with Country, kin, ancestors, and all entities. The issue is not lack of connection but failure to recognize and properly fulfill the obligations that connection creates. Martin writes: "We are part of the world as much as it is part of us, existing within a

network of relations amongst Entities that are reciprocal." This is not something one might feel more or less strongly; it is what one is.

## The pedagogical problem

This creates a profound pedagogical problem. If connection is the ground of being rather than something to be developed, how does one address the very real disconnection that characterizes modern life? Many people genuinely do not feel connected to the natural world, to distant communities, to future generations. This disconnection drives destructive behavior—overconsumption, indifference to suffering, short-term thinking that sacrifices long-term wellbeing.

The IDG framework's answer is to help people develop the feeling of connection through practices like nature immersion, perspective-taking exercises, mindfulness meditation, studying systems thinking, engaging with diverse communities, and practices that reveal interdependence. These approaches have demonstrated value. People who participate in them often report increased sense of connection and subsequently make different choices.

Aboriginal epistemologies would frame the problem differently. The issue is not that people lack connection but that colonial, capitalist structures have violently severed people from their relationships with land, disrupted kinship systems, and created illusions of separation. The work is not developing new connections but healing damage to relationships that have always existed, removing barriers to experiencing what is true, restoring people to right relationship with Country and kin.

Yunkaporta makes this point sharply when he critiques the notion that we need to save the world: "What needs changing are the patterns of relationship that make our current civilization destructive and fragile." The problem is not insufficient individual connection-consciousness but systemic patterns that enforce separation. Developing more individuals with feelings of connection while maintaining extractive, dominance-based relationships with land merely produces what he calls cognitive dissonance.

## Connectedness as identity structure versus feeling state

The essay examining the IDG through ego development theory makes a crucial distinction regarding Connectedness. At earlier developmental stages, connection is understood as moral value or aspiration—"I should care about the environment, I should think about future generations." At middle stages, it becomes part of identity—"I am someone who cares about these things." At later stages, the boundary between self and larger wholes becomes genuinely permeable. The person experiences themselves as constituted by their relationships and context, such that harm to the ecosystem is experienced as harm to oneself.

This progression toward what the framework calls "systemic inclusion" begins to approach Aboriginal relational ontology. At the autonomous stage (E8), "the person experiences themselves not as separate individual who relates to systems but as participant in systems, as local expression of larger patterns." This sounds remarkably similar to Martin's description of Ways of Being as constituted through reciprocal relations with entities.

But there remains a crucial difference. Western developmental frameworks present this as an achievement reached through stages of growth from earlier, more bounded forms of selfhood. Aboriginal ontology presents it as the ground of being from which people should never have

departed. One framework says "develop toward relational consciousness through these stages." The other says "remember and maintain the relational consciousness that has always been the nature of being."

This difference is not merely theoretical. It shapes how transformation is understood to happen. If relational consciousness is an achievement, then the work is supporting people's vertical development through stages—providing experiences that challenge their current meaning-making, offering contemplative practices that reveal interdependence, creating relationships that expand identity boundaries. If relational consciousness is the ground of being, then the work is removing colonial barriers, healing relationships with land, restoring kinship structures, reconnecting people to Country.

## Humility: responding to need versus recognizing position

The quality of Humility provides another angle on these tensions. The IDG defines it as "being able to respond to the needs of the situation without concern for one's own importance." This framing emphasizes ego-transcendence—the capacity to set aside self-importance and respond to what the situation requires.

From an Aboriginal perspective, humility is not something one develops but something that naturally emerges from recognizing one's position within gurrutu. When you understand yourself as one small strand in an infinite kinship web, when you know that countless ancestors came before and countless descendants will come after, when you recognize that you are related to the rock and the river and the wind, humility is not a virtue you cultivate but a reality you inhabit.

Graham articulates this when she describes how Aboriginal cultures transcend ego: "A collective responsibility to land is vital if people are even to attempt to transcend ego and possessions; the point is that land always comes before ego and possessions." When land comes before ego, when one's identity is fundamentally embedded in relationship with Country and kin, the separate self that could be puffed up with importance or deflated with humiliation simply makes less sense as the organizing center of experience.

The Bawaka collective describes how understanding gurrutu reveals that "everything fits and makes a whole in an incredibly complex, everlasting web." To know one's place in this web is to know one's smallness relative to the whole while simultaneously knowing one's essential belonging and responsibility. This is not humility as suppression of self-importance but humility as accurate recognition of how persons and wholes relate.

Yet we must be careful here not to romanticize or essentialize. Aboriginal peoples experience the full range of human emotions including pride, defensiveness, and conflict. The observation is not that Indigenous peoples automatically embody perfect humility while Western peoples are doomed to egocentricity. Rather, the ontological ground makes different things available. When being itself is understood as relational participation in larger patterns, humility emerges more naturally than when being is understood as autonomous individuality whose importance must be constructed and defended.

## Empathy and compassion: psychological skill or kinship obligation?

The IDG quality of Empathy and Compassion—"connecting to others, oneself, and nature with kindness, care, and love, guided by the intention to reduce suffering"—frames these as psychological and emotional capacities that individuals develop. Contemporary neuroscience and psychology treat empathy as a skill that can be strengthened through practice. Mirror neurons, perspective-taking abilities, emotional regulation—these are seen as trainable capacities that enable people to feel and respond to others' experiences.

Aboriginal epistemologies would understand care and compassion not primarily as psychological skills but as expressions of kinship obligation. The Bawaka collective writes about caring as Country rather than caring for Country—the distinction is crucial. When the river is your grandmother, you don't need to develop empathy for the river through perspective-taking exercises. Care flows from the relationship itself.

Martin describes how "Relations amongst Entities are also affected in the same way" when kinship patterns shift. When a community member dies, relationships change throughout the entire kinship network, affecting how everyone relates to everyone else. The care and responsibility one has for others is not based on psychological capacity to feel their feelings but on the kinship position one occupies relative to them.

This doesn't mean Aboriginal peoples are more naturally empathic or compassionate than others. It means the framework for understanding care is different. Care is not primarily a feeling state or psychological skill but an obligation and practice embedded in relationship. You care for your Country not because you've developed the capacity to empathize with ecosystems but because you are that Country, you are constituted by relationship with it, and maintaining it properly is part of what it means to be who you are.

The IDG framework's emphasis on "intention to reduce suffering" also reveals particular assumptions. While reducing suffering is certainly valued in Aboriginal cultures, the relationship to suffering might be understood differently. Some suffering may be necessary for learning, for initiation, for transformation. Not all difficulty should be eliminated. What matters is maintaining right relationship through whatever circumstances arise, not maximizing comfort or minimizing pain.

## The problem with training connection

When the IDG framework suggests developing Connectedness, Humility, and Empathy through training, it participates in what might be called the "commodification of consciousness." These qualities become skills to be acquired, competencies to be certified, assets to be accumulated. This mirrors the logic of capitalism, where everything—including one's consciousness and capacity for relationship—becomes resource to be developed for instrumental purposes.

Even when those purposes are noble—addressing climate change, reducing inequality, serving the common good—the logic of individual development risks reinforcing the very structures it claims to transform. If we develop more competent individuals without changing the systems that create separation, we may only produce what Yunkaporta describes as people trying to feel connected while maintaining extractive relationships. The cognitive dissonance can be managed through spiritual bypassing, where one cultivates feelings of connection while one's material participation in the world remains unchanged.

Aboriginal epistemologies suggest that genuine transformation requires not individual consciousness development but collective relationship restoration. The work is not helping people feel more connected but actually restructuring how communities relate to land, how economies value reciprocity over extraction, how governance systems honor kinship obligations, how knowledge systems recognize Country as teacher. This is not work that can be done primarily through individual interior practice, however valuable such practices might be as one component of broader transformation.

## Where frameworks might meet

Yet there may be points of genuine complementarity. The IDG framework's recognition that Connectedness, Inner Compass, and Humility are "identifications" rather than simply trainable skills suggests awareness that these touch something deeper than behavioral competencies. And the framework's emphasis on caring for "communities, the living planet, and future generations" resonates with Aboriginal obligations to Country and across generations.

Perhaps the IDG framework's developmental approach serves a transitional function. For people shaped by Western individualism, who genuinely do not feel connected to larger wholes, practices that strengthen the feeling of connection may be necessary steps. The danger is mistaking these steps for the destination—assuming that developed feelings of connectedness are equivalent to the ontological relationality embedded in gurrutu.

The question remains: Can a framework rooted in individual development lead to genuinely relational consciousness, or does the path shape the destination in ways that make the endpoint fundamentally different? Can developing individual capacity for connection transform into recognition of already-existing relationship, or do these remain distinct forms of consciousness emerging from incompatible ontologies?

Perhaps the answer depends on whether the IDG framework can hold its own tools lightly enough to be transformed by engagement with Aboriginal epistemologies. The Ganma metaphor suggests that fresh water and salt water can meet and mix while each retains its distinctiveness, creating foam—new knowledge—at their interface. But this requires that neither water claims to subsume the other, that the distinctiveness is genuinely honored even in mixing.

For the IDG framework's "Relating" dimension to genuinely engage Aboriginal understanding of relationship would require acknowledging that it is not describing universal truths about human development but particular Western approaches that may serve transitional purposes within colonial contexts while recognizing the profound difference between developing feelings of connection and restoring ontological relationship. It would require shifting from "How do we develop more connected individuals?" to "How do we restore communities to right relationship with Country and each other?" These are not the same question, and their answers lead in different directions.

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# 6. "COLLABORATING" AND "ACTING" - INDIVIDUAL AGENCY OR COLLECTIVE RESPONSIBILITY?

## Individual actors working together

The final two dimensions of the IDG framework—Collaborating and Acting—focus on how individuals work with others and drive change in the world. The Collaborating dimension includes Communication Skills, Co-creation Skills, Inclusive Mindset and Intercultural Competence, Trust, and Mobilization Skills. The Acting dimension includes Courage, Optimism, and Perseverance. Together, these dimensions emphasize individual capacities for effective action in service of collective goals.

The framework's description of Collaborating states: "Working together across differences to generate shared commitment and drive positive change." This assumes individuals as the fundamental units who then come together to collaborate. Each person develops their communication skills, co-creation abilities, and inclusive mindset individually, and then applies these skills when working with others. The framework treats collaboration as something individuals do, not as the ground from which individuals emerge.

Similarly, the Acting dimension focuses on individual qualities that enable effective action: "Driving change requires courage, optimism and perseverance to face challenges and act meaningfully despite uncertainty." Again, the individual is the primary agent. Change happens when individuals with sufficient courage, optimism, and perseverance take action. The framework acknowledges that change requires working together, but the capacity for change is located in competent individuals who possess the necessary qualities.

## Distributed agency in Aboriginal ontologies

Aboriginal ontologies distribute agency across human and more-than-human entities rather than concentrating it in individual human actors. The Bawaka collective describes how Country itself has agency and author-ity: "We work to bring to the academic world... some aspects of Yolŋu ways of knowing and being." Bawaka is not merely the setting for human action but an active participant that shapes what happens and what can be known. The place itself is co-author of the knowledge that emerges.

This distribution of agency extends throughout gurrutu. When a woman digs for ganguri at Bawaka, agency is distributed across the woman, the digging stick, the sand, the yams themselves, the ancestors who dug here before, the spirits who watch and guide, the season that determines what will be found, and Bawaka itself. The Bawaka collective writes: "When we say the ganguri and the women have changed each other, are connected together, we mean this as a fact, a fact of cells and history influencing each other, becoming each other, changing each other."

None of these entities is the primary agent driving the action. Rather, action emerges through the relationships among all participants. The woman doesn't possess digging skills that she applies to passive environment. She participates in a co-becoming with place, tools, yams, and ancestors through which digging happens and all entities are transformed.

This fundamentally challenges the IDG framework's assumption of individual human agency as primary. When Martin describes Ways of Doing, she writes: "Our Ways of Doing are a synthesis and an articulation of our Ways of Knowing and Ways of Being." Action flows from ontology and epistemology—from who one is in relationship and what one knows through relationship—rather than from individual skills and qualities applied to external situations.

## Collaboration or kinship enactment?

The IDG quality of Co-creation Skills—"engaging with others to co-create new ideas, insights, and solutions in collaboration across differences"—treats collaboration as something individuals learn to do well through developing particular skills. Communication, facilitation, conflict resolution, perspective integration—these are competencies that enable effective collaboration.

Aboriginal frameworks would understand collective work not as skilled individuals collaborating but as enactment of kinship obligations. When community comes together for ceremony, for land management, for decision-making, or for any collective work, people participate according to their kinship position. Different roles are fulfilled by different people based on gender, life stage, and specific relationships. As Martin writes, "no one person or Entity knows all, but each has sets of knowledges to fulfil particular roles. These roles are gender specific and directed by life stage."

This is not collaboration in the sense of individuals with diverse skills choosing to work together. It is collective enactment of patterns that have always structured right relationship. People don't need to be trained in co-creation skills; they need to learn their kinship position and the obligations it entails. The Bawaka collective describes how "Through gurrutu bonds of kinship are performed, they are practiced in ways that confer certain rights, responsibilities, behaviours and affections."

Moreover, the collective work includes more-than-human participants. When Aboriginal peoples engage in land management practices like cultural burning, they are not individual humans acting on passive environment. They are participating in relationship with Country, fire, plants, animals, spirits, and ancestors. The knowledge of when and how to burn comes not from individual expertise but from listening to Country, attending to what the land teaches, following patterns maintained across generations.

## The Ganma framework and "two-way" work

The concept of Ganma, developed by Yolŋu peoples, offers important insight into how different knowledge systems might work together. Ganma refers to places where fresh water and salt water meet and mix. The fresh water and salt water represent parallel knowledge systems that remain distinct even as they interact. As the original articulation states: "It is like what some [non-Indigenous people] call a 'dialectical' relationship, in which two opposed patterns of ideas complement, interact and relate to one another, but never lose their distinctiveness as separate and opposed parts of one whole."

This is fundamentally different from the IDG's notion of collaboration across differences. The IDG assumes that diverse individuals and perspectives can be integrated into shared understanding and collective action. Differences are resources to be leveraged, perspectives to be combined, viewpoints to be synthesized. The goal is ultimately unity—coming together around shared commitments to drive positive change.

Ganma insists on maintaining distinctiveness even in engagement. The fresh water and salt water do not merge into a homogeneous mixture. They interact, they influence each other, they create foam at their meeting—new knowledge emerges from their engagement. But each remains what it is. Indigenous knowledge systems and Western knowledge systems do not synthesize into a higher unity. They remain separate and opposed parts of one whole.

Applied to the IDG framework, this suggests profound limitations to its Collaborating dimension. When the framework speaks of "working together across differences," it assumes differences can be bridged through sufficient communication skills, inclusive mindset, and intercultural competence. But what if some differences are ontological—not different perspectives within shared reality but different realities that cannot be synthesized?

If Aboriginal and Western ontologies are like fresh and salt water, then genuine engagement requires not collaboration toward shared goals but something more like Ganma—respectful interaction that honors irreducible difference, that allows each knowledge system its integrity, that creates new possibilities at the interface without claiming to unite what cannot and should not be united.

## Whose goals are mobilized?

The IDG quality of Mobilization Skills—"inspiring and mobilizing others to engage in shared purposes"—assumes that individuals with developed skills can inspire and mobilize others toward common goals. This treats mobilization as a technical skill—identifying shared values, communicating compelling vision, creating structures for participation, maintaining momentum.

But Aboriginal epistemologies would ask: Whose purposes are being mobilized? Who determines the goals? How is authority distributed in deciding what collective action should pursue? Martin writes about how Aboriginal research must be grounded in "protection and preservation of our country and its Entities and the protection and preservation of our Ways of Knowing, Ways of Being and Ways of Doing." The purposes that guide collective work emerge from these obligations, not from individuals who mobilize others.

Moreover, traditional Aboriginal governance does not concentrate decision-making authority in individuals who then mobilize others. Decisions emerge through collective processes that include Elders, different kinship groups, men's and women's knowledge, and listening to what Country teaches. As Martin describes, "Age does not denote Eldership... People are observed and their activities noted... when it is felt that their minds are receptive to understanding their role in adult society, they will be invited to become a member of the Elders group not an Elder in their own individual right but for what they can contribute to society as a group."

This governance structure distributes authority across the community in ways that make individual "mobilization skills" less relevant than collective discernment and enactment of shared obligations. The question is not "How can I inspire others to engage in shared purposes?" but "What does our kinship structure require of us? What is Country teaching about what needs to happen?"

## Courage, optimism, perseverance: whose heroic action?

The Acting dimension's focus on Courage, Optimism, and Perseverance reveals perhaps most clearly the framework's heroic individualism. These qualities are framed as enabling individuals to "face challenges and act meaningfully despite uncertainty." This is the language of the hero's journey—the courageous individual who perseveres despite obstacles, maintains optimism in dark times, and through their action drives change in the world.

Graham's analysis of Western ontology illuminates what underlies this heroic stance: "the discrete individual whirling in space, completely free. Its freedom is a fearful freedom however, because a sense of deepest spiritual loneliness and alienation envelopes the individual. The result is then that whatever form the environment or landscape takes, it becomes and remains a hostile place. The discrete individual then has to arm itself not just literally against other discrete individuals, but against its environment."

The heroic individual acting courageously in the face of challenge can be understood as this discrete self attempting to overcome its fundamental isolation through brave action. The need for optimism emerges from the underlying anxiety that one is alone against hostile environment. The emphasis on perseverance reflects the belief that individual will and effort can overcome obstacles.

Aboriginal ontology, by contrast, emphasizes participation in patterns larger than the individual. When action is needed, it flows from collective discernment of what relationships require, not from individual courage to face challenges. The Bawaka collective describes how "We walk through the land, to walk together, to see Nature grow by itself, to know there is food for us, waiting." The work is not conquering hostile environment through brave individual action but participating in Country's abundance through right relationship.

This doesn't mean Aboriginal peoples lack courage or perseverance. But these qualities serve different purposes and emerge from different ontologies. Courage might be needed to maintain right relationship in the face of colonial violence, to protect Country against ongoing destruction, to keep ceremony alive despite suppression. But this is not individual heroism; it is collective resistance rooted in kinship obligations.

## The problem of "saving the world"

Yunkaporta's critique becomes most relevant here: "The world doesn't actually need us to 'save' it. The planet and Life-as-such have navigated collapse and regeneration many times. What needs changing are the patterns of relationship that make our current civilization destructive and fragile."

The IDG framework's emphasis on developing individual capacities to "drive change" and "address complex global challenges" participates in the logic Yunkaporta critiques. It assumes that human action—specifically, action by more competent individuals—will save the world. But if the fundamental problem is destructive patterns of relationship, then developing more skilled individuals may only make us more efficient at perpetuating those patterns.

The alternative suggested by Aboriginal epistemologies is not abandoning action but grounding it differently. Rather than heroic individuals courageously driving change, communities maintain right relationship with Country and each other. Rather than mobilizing people toward

shared purposes determined by visionary leaders, collective discernment emerges from listening to what kinship obligations and Country's teaching reveal as needed. Rather than persevering through obstacles to achieve predetermined goals, ongoing participation in regenerative patterns that have sustained life across deep time.

## Where might complementarity exist?

Yet the IDG framework's emphasis on facing complexity, driving change, and working across differences addresses real challenges. Global crises do require coordination across diverse communities and cultures. Large-scale transformation does demand sustained effort over time. Navigating uncertainty does require qualities that might reasonably be called courage, optimism, and perseverance.

The question is whether these qualities and capacities can be developed and deployed in ways that genuinely serve transformation rather than reinforcing the structures that created crisis. The IDG framework's emphasis on serving "the good of the whole" and working in service of sustainability suggests alignment with Aboriginal values of collective wellbeing and care for future generations.

But alignment in values does not necessarily mean alignment in ontology or practice. Two frameworks can both value sustainability while having fundamentally different understandings of what humans are, how knowledge emerges, what action means, and how transformation happens. The IDG framework's approach through individual competence development may serve transitional purposes in Western contexts while remaining incommensurable with Aboriginal approaches through kinship obligation and Country relationship.

The Ganma framework again offers guidance: fresh and salt water can meet and mix while each retains distinctiveness. Perhaps the IDG framework represents "salt water" approaches that serve Western institutional contexts, while Aboriginal frameworks represent "fresh water" that guides Indigenous communities and offers wisdom to those who can respectfully engage it. The foam created at their meeting—new knowledge and practice emerging from genuine engagement—becomes possible only when each water's integrity is honored.

For the IDG framework to genuinely engage Aboriginal understanding of collaboration and action would require profound humility about its own limitations. It would mean acknowledging that its emphasis on individual competence, heroic action, and driving change emerges from particular cultural assumptions rather than universal truths. It would mean recognizing that the work of addressing global crises might look less like developing more competent change agents and more like restoring communities to right relationship with land, dismantling colonial structures that enforce separation, and supporting Indigenous peoples' authority over their territories and knowledge systems.

Whether such humility is possible within frameworks designed for mass communication to Western institutions remains an open question. But without it, the IDG's Collaborating and Acting dimensions risk perpetuating the very individualism and human-centrism that underlies ecological and social crisis, even as they aim sincerely at transformation.

Part II has examined the IDG framework's dimensions of Being, Relating, Collaborating, and Acting through Aboriginal epistemological lenses, revealing how qualities like Inner Compass, Connectedness, Co-creation Skills, and Courage appear profoundly different when viewed through relational ontology versus individualist assumptions. Part III will step back to consider what each framework reveals about the other—how Indigenous epistemologies illuminate the IDG's blind spots and cultural specificity, and how the IDG's practical orientation reveals both possibilities and challenges in Indigenous-settler knowledge relations.

# Part III: What the Frameworks Illuminate About Each Other

## 7. WHAT INDIGENOUS EPISTEMOLOGIES REVEAL ABOUT THE IDG'S BLIND SPOTS

### The competence trap: development as industrial logic

When Indigenous epistemologies are brought into conversation with the Inner Development Goals framework, one of the first things they reveal is how thoroughly the IDG participates in industrial logic. The very structure of the framework—identifying gaps, developing skills, measuring progress, achieving competence—mirrors the logic of industrial production. Humans are treated as resources to be developed for productivity in addressing global challenges.

This is not immediately obvious from within Western contexts, where this developmental logic seems natural and neutral. Of course we identify what capacities are needed, assess where people currently stand, and design interventions to build those capacities. This is how education works, how professional development works, how organizational change works. The IDG framework's genius, from this perspective, is making these processes applicable to inner development rather than just technical skills.

But Aboriginal epistemologies reveal this as culturally specific logic rather than universal truth about how humans grow and change. Martin's description of Ways of Knowing emphasizes that knowledge is "taught and learned in certain contexts, in certain ways at certain times. It is therefore purposeful, only to the extent to which it is used. If it is not used, then it is not necessary." This stands in stark contrast to the IDG's assumption that all 25 qualities should be developed regardless of context, role, or need.

The industrial logic becomes even clearer when we consider what it excludes. The IDG framework has no place for ceremony, for relationship with ancestors, for listening to what Country teaches, for the distributed wisdom of Elders, for knowledge that emerges through participating in seasonal cycles, for learning that happens through co-becoming with place. These are not gaps in an otherwise comprehensive framework; they are fundamental exclusions that reveal the framework's cultural assumptions.

Yunkaporta's critique of industrial civilization applies here: the patterns that created crisis cannot be escaped simply by developing more competent individuals. If the IDG framework treats humans as resources to be optimized for better problem-solving, it may inadvertently reinforce the very instrumental rationality that treats everything—including consciousness itself—as resource to be exploited. The framework risks becoming what it opposes: another technique for making individuals more productive in service of a fundamentally unchanged system.

## The separation anxiety made visible

Perhaps the most profound revelation Indigenous epistemologies offer is how the IDG framework's very existence testifies to the depth of modern alienation. The fact that "Connectedness" needs to be identified as a quality to be developed, that people need training in feeling connected to humanity and the natural world, that entire industries have emerged around teaching people presence and self-awareness—all of this reveals how thoroughly colonial capitalism has succeeded in fragmenting persons from relationship.

Graham's analysis is devastating in its clarity: "Throughout the whole historical period, from the birth of the state to the transformation of people into citizens of nations and members of ever-changing class systems, social relations became ever more disconnected, alienated and strained." The discrete individual "whirling in space, completely free" experiences such "deepest spiritual loneliness and alienation" that it must constantly arm itself against environment and other individuals.

From Aboriginal perspective, the IDG framework is not a solution to this alienation but a symptom of it. Only a profoundly disconnected culture would need to teach people that they are connected to the web of life. Only a society where relationships have been so damaged would need to develop individual capacities for empathy and compassion rather than embedding people in kinship structures that naturally generate care and obligation.

This doesn't mean the framework's efforts are worthless. Within the reality of colonial disconnection, practices that help people experience connection have genuine value. But Aboriginal epistemologies reveal that treating symptoms—developing individual feelings of connection—may distract from addressing causes—the ongoing violence of dispossession, the economic structures that require treating land as commodity, the governance systems that ignore Indigenous authority, the knowledge regimes that dismiss Aboriginal wisdom.

The Bawaka collective's work on co-becoming makes this visible. When they describe how persons and place emerge together through relationship, when they insist that Country itself has author-ity and agency, when they articulate gurrutu as the web that constitutes all beings—they reveal that connection is not something one develops but something one has been violently disconnected from through colonialism. The work is not developing new capacities but healing colonial wounds.

## The universalizing gesture and the erasure of difference

Despite the IDG framework's emergence through consultation with diverse practitioners and researchers, Indigenous epistemologies reveal how it ultimately presents one developmental pathway as universal. The 25 skills and qualities, the five dimensions, the progressive logic of development—all are offered as what humans need to address global challenges, without acknowledging that "what humans need" is itself culturally constructed.

Martin's insistence on Quandamooka-specific ontology directly challenges any framework claiming universal validity. She writes: "Given the above discussion, Indigenist research must centralise the core structures of Aboriginal ontology as a framework for research if it is to serve us well. Otherwise it is western research done by Indigenous people." The same applies to development frameworks. If the IDG's structure, assumptions, and qualities are not grounded

in specific Aboriginal ontologies, then they remain Western development frameworks regardless of how many Indigenous people are consulted in their creation.

This reveals a deeper problem with the consultation process itself. When diverse perspectives are gathered and then synthesized into a unified framework, the synthesis necessarily privileges certain epistemologies over others. The result appears comprehensive and inclusive, but Aboriginal epistemologies reveal what has been lost in translation. Gurrutu cannot be reduced to "Connectedness." Ways of Knowing cannot be captured in "Complexity Awareness." Relationship with Country cannot be expressed as "Long-term Orientation and Visioning."

The Ganma metaphor illuminates why synthesis is problematic. Fresh water and salt water remain distinct even as they mix. Aboriginal and Western knowledge systems are "separate and opposed parts of one whole"—not because one is right and the other wrong, but because they emerge from fundamentally different ontologies. When the IDG framework synthesizes diverse perspectives into unified categories, it functions like a filter that allows through only what fits Western ontological assumptions while filtering out what doesn't.

This is not necessarily intentional or malicious. The framework's creators genuinely sought broad input and tried to honor diverse perspectives. But the very structure of creating a universal framework applicable across cultures participates in colonial logic that assumes Western categories can contain all forms of knowledge. Aboriginal epistemologies insist on their own integrity, their own categories, their own authority—not as variations on universal themes but as fundamentally different ways of understanding what humans are and how transformation happens.

## The temporal problem: progress versus cycles

Indigenous epistemologies reveal how deeply the IDG framework is embedded in Western temporal ontology—the assumption that time moves linearly from past through present to future, and that development means progress from less to more, from simple to complex, from unconscious to conscious. This temporal framework is so fundamental to Western thought that it typically remains invisible, appearing as simply the way time is rather than one cultural construction among others.

The Bawaka collective's description of gurrutu's recursive patterns—where "the daughter of a granddaughter is a mother. The little baby is a mother of an old woman"—reveals a profoundly different temporal ontology. Time is not linear but cyclical and recursive. Patterns return, not as repetition but as regeneration. What has been will be again, transformed through each iteration but recognizable in its essential structure.

This cyclical temporality doesn't reject change or growth. Martin writes that "The time of learning in the Aboriginal world never stops. It goes on and on." But learning is not progressive accumulation where individuals become more knowledgeable over time. Rather, learning involves deepening participation in patterns that have always existed, shifting through life stages that bring different responsibilities and knowledge, maintaining relationships across generations.

The IDG framework's developmental logic—identifying where one currently stands and moving toward greater capability—assumes linear progress. One develops from less self-aware to more self-aware, from less connected to more connected, from less able to collaborate to

more skilled at collaboration. This forward movement toward completion is taken as natural and desirable.

But Aboriginal temporal ontology suggests that this orientation toward endless growth may itself be problematic. Yunkaporta describes how Indigenous pattern thinking recognizes regenerative cycles rather than progressive development. The seasons return, ceremonies are performed again, knowledge is maintained across generations through ongoing practice rather than accumulated in individuals. The emphasis is on sustainability—maintaining right relationship—rather than on growth and progress.

This reveals something crucial about the IDG framework: its developmental logic mirrors the capitalist imperative of constant growth. Just as economies must constantly grow, individuals must constantly develop. There is no endpoint where one has sufficient awareness, adequate connection, enough collaborative skill. The framework implies perpetual self-improvement, endless optimization, constant striving for more.

Aboriginal epistemologies suggest an alternative: not endless growth but right relationship maintained through cyclical participation in regenerative patterns. The work is not becoming more capable but fulfilling obligations, not accumulating competencies but maintaining balance, not progressing toward completion but participating appropriately in patterns that have no end because they are the very structure of being.

## The location problem: transferable skills versus emplaced knowledge

When the IDG framework presents 25 skills and qualities applicable across contexts, it assumes that inner development is essentially the same work regardless of where one is located. Self-awareness developed in Sweden should be fundamentally similar to self-awareness developed in Kenya or Japan. Complexity awareness is complexity awareness, wherever it's cultivated. The qualities are portable—once developed, an individual carries them into any context.

Aboriginal epistemologies reveal this assumption as profoundly problematic. Knowledge, in Aboriginal frameworks, is fundamentally emplaced—inseparable from specific Country, specific kinship relations, specific entities and places. Martin describes how Ways of Knowing are "specific to ontology and Entities of Land, Animals, Plants, Waterways, Skies, Climate and the Spiritual systems of Aboriginal groups." One cannot abstract knowledge from its place and carry it elsewhere as portable skill.

The Bawaka collective's work on co-becoming makes this especially clear. When women dig for ganguri at Bawaka, the knowledge that emerges is inseparable from that specific place, those specific yams, that specific sand, those specific ancestors. The women are not developing general "yam harvesting skills" that could be applied anywhere. They are participating in relationship with Bawaka, and Bawaka teaches what needs to be known in that moment, in that place, with those entities.

This reveals how the IDG framework participates in colonial logic that treats land as abstract space rather than specific Country. If inner development is about cultivating portable competencies, then it doesn't matter where one is located. One could develop the same qualities in corporate headquarters, at a retreat center, or on stolen land—the location is merely setting, not essential participant in what knowledge emerges and what transformation happens.

But if knowledge is fundamentally emplaced, if persons and places co-become, if Country itself is teacher and knowledge-holder, then development cannot be abstracted from location. The work of transformation looks entirely different on Quandamooka Country than on Yolŋu Country than on any other specific place. And critically, the work looks different depending on whether one is Indigenous to that place or a settler on stolen land.

Aboriginal epistemologies thus reveal that the IDG framework's universalizing gesture erases not just cultural difference but relationship to land. The framework can be applied anywhere because it doesn't recognize Country as essential to what development means. This allows it to be broadly accessible but at the cost of fundamental disconnection from the very relationality it claims to cultivate.

## Missing dimensions: ceremony, ancestors, spirits, and more-than-human kin

When we examine what the IDG framework includes and excludes, Aboriginal epistemologies reveal striking absences. There is no dimension addressing relationship with ancestors. No quality acknowledging spirits as real entities with agency and knowledge. No recognition of ceremony as essential to transformation and maintenance of right relationship. No inclusion of the more-than-human world as teachers and kin rather than mere "environment" or "nature."

These are not minor gaps but fundamental exclusions that reveal the framework's materialist, humanist, and rationalist assumptions. The IDG operates within a worldview where only humans have the kind of consciousness that matters for development, where the physical world is all that exists, where transformation happens through human effort and practice rather than through relationship with non-human teachers and guides.

Martin's Ways of Knowing explicitly include "the Spiritual systems of Aboriginal groups" as entities with whom one has relationships and from whom one learns. The Bawaka collective describes Country itself as co-author, having agency and teaching. Graham discusses how Aboriginal cultures understand "the relationship between the human spirit and the natural life force" as essential to meaning and identity. Yunkaporta describes dreaming mind and ancestor mind as integral to Indigenous pattern thinking.

All of this is excluded from the IDG framework, not because it was overlooked but because it doesn't fit within the ontological boundaries the framework assumes. To include relationship with ancestors and spirits as essential dimensions of inner development would require acknowledging realities that Western materialist worldview denies. To recognize ceremony as necessary for transformation would require admitting that rational individual effort is insufficient. To treat the more-than-human world as teachers would require decentering human consciousness as the locus of development.

The framework's exclusion of these dimensions reveals its Western cultural specificity more clearly than anything it includes. A genuinely universal framework for human development would need to account for the fact that most of humanity throughout most of history has understood transformation as involving relationship with ancestors, spirits, and more-than-human beings. The IDG's exclusion of these dimensions shows it is not describing universal human development but Western secular humanist development.

Aboriginal epistemologies don't simply reveal these gaps; they insist that what the IDG excludes may be more essential than what it includes. If transformation requires restoring right

relationship with Country, ancestors, and more-than-human kin, then developing individual competencies while ignoring these relationships may actually obstruct genuine transformation by reinforcing the human-centered, materialist orientation that drives ecological crisis.

## Listening and waiting as primary modes

Perhaps one of the subtlest but most important revelations Indigenous epistemologies offer is what the IDG framework makes invisible through its emphasis on doing, acting, and developping. The framework's five dimensions—Being, Thinking, Relating, Collaborating, Acting—are all active. Even "Being" is framed as "cultivating our inner life," an active process of development. There is no dimension addressing receptivity, listening, waiting, or allowing.

Martin's description of Ways of Knowing includes "listening, sensing, viewing, reviewing, reading, watching, waiting, observing" alongside more active processes. The Bawaka collective emphasizes the importance of listening to Country: "We read it every day, every minute, every moment. We share that knowledge with the children, and now with you, it's a part of us." This reading and listening are not preliminary steps before action but essential ongoing practices through which knowledge emerges and right relationship is maintained.

The emphasis on waiting is particularly significant. In Aboriginal pedagogies, much learning happens through patient observation over long periods. Knowledge is not extracted through aggressive inquiry but revealed through respectful attention. One waits for Country to teach, for Elders to share when the time is right, for understanding to emerge through participation rather than forcing it through effort.

The IDG framework's action-orientation reveals its cultural embeddedness in Western activist traditions that valorize effort, agency, and making things happen. The framework assumes that addressing global challenges requires humans acting more skillfully, thinking more complexly, collaborating more effectively. There is little space for the possibility that what's needed is less human action and more listening to what land, ancestors, and more-than-human beings are teaching.

This reveals a deeper pattern: the IDG framework perpetuates human-centrism even as it gestures toward connection with the more-than-human world. The framework is about developing human capacities to address human-defined challenges. There is no suggestion that humans might need to become less active, less developmental, less focused on their own transformation in order to listen to what other entities are teaching about how to live.

Aboriginal epistemologies thus reveal that the IDG's comprehensiveness may actually be a kind of imperialism—claiming to map all that matters for human development while excluding or marginalizing ways of being that don't center human effort and agency. The qualities of deep listening, patient waiting, and receptive allowing that characterize Aboriginal learning appear in the IDG framework only as means to more effective action, not as valuable in themselves or potentially more important than action.

## The both/and that isn't

Throughout the IDG framework and especially in its presentation materials, there is rhetoric of both/and thinking—honoring both individual and collective, both action and reflection, both

rational and intuitive, both personal and planetary. This language suggests integration and balance, moving beyond either/or dichotomies to embrace paradox and complexity.

Aboriginal epistemologies reveal this both/and rhetoric as often masking a fundamental privy-leging of one side over the other. The framework may gesture toward collective, but its structure centers individual development. It may acknowledge intuition, but its dimensions emphasize cognitive skills. It may value reflection, but its ultimate purpose is more effective action. The both/and becomes a way of appearing inclusive while maintaining Western priorities.

True both/and thinking, as the Ganma metaphor suggests, would require genuinely honoring fresh water and salt water as "separate and opposed parts of one whole." The waters don't merge; they remain distinct even as they mix. Applied to the IDG framework, this would mean acknowledging that Aboriginal and Western approaches to development may be finally incommensurable—not higher and lower on a developmental hierarchy, not complementary pieces that together make a whole, but fundamentally different ontologies that cannot be synthesized.

The framework's current both/and rhetoric suggests that with sufficient integration, individual and collective development can be harmonized, Western and Indigenous perspectives can be synthesized, action and receptivity can be balanced. But Aboriginal epistemologies insist on distinctiveness that resists synthesis. Gurrutu is not a different way of thinking about connection that can be integrated into Western developmental frameworks; it is a fundamentally different ontology that reveals Western frameworks as culturally specific rather than universal.

This doesn't mean the IDG framework and Aboriginal epistemologies cannot engage. But genuine engagement requires acknowledging incommensurability, respecting what cannot be translated or integrated, allowing each knowledge system its integrity rather than claiming to synthesize them into higher unity. The foam created where fresh and salt water meet is not a new water that combines the best of both; it is something created by their interaction while each water remains what it is.

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# 8. WHAT THE IDG REVEALS ABOUT CHALLENGES IN INDIGENOUS-SETTLER RELATIONS

## The accessibility paradox

When we reverse the direction of inquiry and ask what the IDG framework reveals about challenges in Indigenous-settler knowledge relations, the first thing that emerges is what might be called the accessibility paradox. Indigenous epistemologies, grounded in specific ontologies and emplaced knowledge, can appear inaccessible or difficult to operationalize within Western institutional contexts. The IDG framework's accessibility—its clear structure, measurable qualities, and actionable pathways—serves real pragmatic needs that Aboriginal frameworks may struggle to meet within colonial systems.

This is not because Aboriginal epistemologies are less sophisticated or less practical. As we have seen, concepts like gurrutu represent complexity frameworks as intricate as any Western systems thinking, and Aboriginal land management practices sustained thriving ecosystems for tens of thousands of years. The "inaccessibility" is not inherent but created by the dominance of Western institutional structures that require particular forms of knowledge presentation.

Martin addresses this directly when she writes about Indigenist research: "For Indigenist research to be recognised by the western research academy it must also identify its methodology. But western research is a western practice and, as such, it is not a feature of our own world, so a research framework that is entirely Aboriginal is not possible." The same challenge exists with development frameworks. To be recognized and applied in Western organizations, frameworks must speak Western language, emphasize individual competencies, provide measurable outcomes, and fit within existing institutional structures.

The IDG framework does all of this effectively. It provides terminology that makes sense to corporate leaders, government officials, and educational institutions. It offers assessment tools and development pathways that fit organizational timelines and budgets. It translates complex inner work into language that doesn't threaten or confuse people shaped by Western education and professional culture.

This pragmatic accessibility has enabled the framework to influence contexts where more culturally specific or ontologically radical approaches would gain no traction. Organizations that would never engage with Aboriginal concepts of gurrutu or Ways of Being/Knowing/Doing might embrace the IDG framework's language of self-awareness and complexity awareness. This creates openings for conversations about inner development that otherwise wouldn't happen.

Yet this accessibility comes at a cost. The very features that make the IDG framework legible to Western institutions—its individual focus, its developmental logic, its measurable competencies—are the features that Aboriginal epistemologies reveal as culturally specific and potentially problematic. The framework's success in Western contexts may depend on precisely what limits its capacity to honor fundamentally different ontologies.

## The translation challenge and the limits of interface

The IDG framework's existence and structure also reveal deep challenges in translating across epistemological difference. When Aboriginal concepts are brought into conversation with the framework, they must either be translated into IDG categories (gurrutu becomes "Connectedness," Ways of Being become "Inner Compass") or remain untranslatable and thus excluded from the framework's scope.

Neither option is satisfactory. Translation risks distortion and appropriation—taking Aboriginal concepts and fitting them into Western frameworks in ways that strip them of their ontological specificity and reduce them to variations on Western themes. But refusing translation risks irrelevance within Western institutional contexts where the IDG framework operates.

The Ganma metaphor offers one approach to this dilemma: create interfaces where different knowledge systems can engage while each maintains its integrity. The foam created where fresh and salt water meet represents new knowledge emerging from genuine encounter. But this requires that neither knowledge system claims to subsume or improve the other, that the interface is genuinely two-way, and that power relations are acknowledged and addressed.

The challenge is that current power structures typically privilege Western frameworks. When the IDG engages with Indigenous perspectives, there is always risk that engagement becomes extraction—taking concepts like interconnection, humility, and long-term thinking from Indigenous cultures while maintaining Western ontological structures and continuing to ignore Indigenous authority over land and knowledge.

The framework's structure reveals this risk. It can incorporate Indigenous values (serving the whole, caring for future generations, recognizing interdependence) while maintaining Western assumptions (individual development, cognitive skills, progressive stages). The result appears inclusive but may actually be appropriative—using Indigenous wisdom to enhance Western effectiveness without challenging Western dominance.

This reveals a fundamental challenge in Indigenous-settler knowledge relations: How can engagement happen across profound epistemological difference without the more powerful knowledge system appropriating and distorting the less institutionally powerful? The IDG framework, despite good intentions, participates in structures that typically answer this question poorly. Western frameworks engage Indigenous knowledge when it's useful, translating what fits and ignoring what doesn't, maintaining ultimate authority over what counts as legitimate knowledge.

## The urgency question and the need for interim approaches

Another challenge the IDG framework reveals is the tension between ecological and social urgency and the time required for fundamental ontological transformation. Global crises demand rapid response. Climate change, biodiversity loss, inequality, and conflict cannot wait for multi-generational shifts in consciousness. If addressing these challenges requires restoring right relationship with Country and fundamentally reconceiving what persons are, we may not have time for such transformation before catastrophic harm occurs.

The IDG framework offers an interim approach. Within existing Western institutional structures, with people shaped by individualist ontology, the framework provides immediately

actionable pathways for developing capacities that might enable more effective response to crisis. Even if these capacities are not the same as the relational consciousness embedded in gurrutu, they may be better than nothing. Even if individual competence development is not the same as collective restoration of right relationship, it may be a step in a direction that serves transformation.

This reveals a genuine dilemma. Aboriginal epistemologies offer profound wisdom about how to live sustainably across deep time, but that wisdom emerged from and serves cultures with very different structures than contemporary industrial societies. Simply telling people steeped in Western ontology to adopt Aboriginal ways of being is neither realistic nor respectful. Genuine transformation of this depth requires time—multiple generations, fundamental restructuring of economic and governance systems, healing of colonial trauma, restoration of relationship with specific lands.

The IDG framework's value may be precisely that it meets people where they are. It doesn't require belief in spirits or ancestors, doesn't demand rejection of Western education, doesn't ask people to abandon their professional contexts. It offers practices and frameworks that work within existing structures while potentially creating conditions for deeper transformation over time.

Yet this pragmatism carries risks. If the IDG framework becomes a substitute for more fundamental change—if organizations adopt inner development programs while maintaining extractive relationships with land, if individuals cultivate self-awareness while participating in systems of oppression, if the framework enables people to feel better about destructive patterns rather than changing those patterns—then its interim value becomes part of the problem rather than part of the solution.

Aboriginal epistemologies thus reveal a challenge the IDG framework cannot resolve on its own: How do we respond to urgent crises with approaches accessible within current structures while also supporting fundamental transformation of those structures? The framework offers no clear answer, suggesting this is a tension that must be held rather than resolved.

## The complicity question: navigating colonial realities

The IDG framework also reveals challenges Indigenous peoples face in navigating colonial institutional realities. Even Indigenous communities must engage with governments, corporations, educational institutions, and legal systems that operate according to Western ontologies. Having shared frameworks that enable dialogue and collaboration may serve Indigenous interests even when those frameworks don't fully honor Indigenous epistemologies.

Martin writes about this directly: "For Indigenist research to be recognised by the western research academy it must also identify its methodology... So Indigenist research occurs through centring Aboriginal Ways of Knowing, Ways of Being and Ways of Doing in alignment with aspects of western qualitative research frameworks." The same strategic engagement may apply to development frameworks. Indigenous peoples might engage with the IDG framework not because it represents their understanding of transformation but because it provides language for conversations that need to happen within colonial institutional contexts.

This strategic engagement is not the same as endorsement. Indigenous peoples using or engaging with Western frameworks like the IDG does not mean those frameworks adequately

represent Indigenous epistemologies or should be applied uncritically within Indigenous communities. It means Indigenous peoples navigate multiple knowledge systems as part of surviving and resisting within colonial realities.

The IDG framework thus reveals the complexity of Indigenous peoples' positioning within settler-colonial states. They must simultaneously maintain their own ontologies and epistemologies while engaging systems that operate according to fundamentally different assumptions. Frameworks like the IDG might serve as translation interfaces—imperfect but pragmatically useful—without claiming to represent Indigenous understanding of development.

This reveals challenges for non-Indigenous people engaging with the framework. When Indigenous voices are included in frameworks like the IDG, is this genuine inclusion or tokenistic diversity? When Indigenous concepts appear in translation, does this honor Indigenous knowledge or appropriate it? When frameworks claim to be universal or comprehensive, does this create space for Indigenous epistemologies or erase their radical difference?

These questions have no simple answers. The IDG framework's engagement with diverse perspectives, including Indigenous voices, may represent genuine effort at inclusion while still participating in colonial knowledge structures. The challenge is maintaining critical awareness of these tensions rather than claiming to have resolved them.

## The both/and possibility: distinct waters that engage

Despite the challenges and tensions revealed when Indigenous epistemologies and the IDG framework are brought into conversation, there may be genuine possibilities for what the Ganma metaphor describes as engagement across difference. Rather than attempting to synthesize or reconcile, both frameworks might maintain their distinctiveness while creating new knowledge at their interface.

This would require significant humility and restraint from the IDG framework and its proponents. It would mean acknowledging the framework as culturally specific rather than universal, recognizing that it serves particular contexts and purposes rather than mapping all forms of human development, and deferring to Indigenous authority on Indigenous knowledge rather than attempting to incorporate or improve it.

It would mean accepting that some differences are finally incommensurable—that Aboriginal relational ontology and Western individualist developmental frameworks may not be integrable, that efforts at synthesis may distort both rather than creating higher unity. The fresh water and salt water remain distinct; the foam created at their meeting is not a new water but something that emerges from their interaction while each retains its integrity.

From this perspective, the IDG framework might serve Western institutional contexts where it emerged and fits, while Aboriginal epistemological frameworks guide Indigenous communities and offer wisdom to settlers willing to engage respectfully. The two frameworks would not compete for universal validity but serve different purposes in different contexts.

The interface becomes important not as synthesis but as dialogue. When the IDG framework is examined through Aboriginal epistemological lenses, its cultural specificity and limitations become visible. When Aboriginal epistemologies are brought into conversation with Western development frameworks, the challenges of translation and the risks of appropriation become

clear. Both frameworks are transformed through genuine encounter—not by merging but by each becoming more aware of its own assumptions and limitations.

This possibility requires structural changes in how knowledge is valued and validated. Currently, Western frameworks like the IDG operate from positions of institutional power—they are taken seriously in policy contexts, corporate settings, educational institutions, and international development. Indigenous epistemologies must constantly justify themselves against Western standards, prove their validity in Western terms, fit themselves into Western categories.

Genuine two-way engagement would require Western frameworks to justify themselves to Indigenous standards, to demonstrate their validity in Indigenous terms, to fit themselves into Indigenous categories when operating in Indigenous contexts. This reversal of usual power relations would create genuinely new possibilities for learning and transformation.

The IDG framework reveals this possibility by its very existence. The fact that it engages with diverse perspectives, that it recognizes limits of purely technical approaches, that it values qualities like humility and connectedness alongside cognitive skills—all suggest openness to transformation through encounter with difference. Whether this openness can extend to acknowledging incommensurability, honoring radical difference, and accepting limits to the framework's scope remains to be seen.

What Indigenous epistemologies and the IDG framework ultimately reveal about each other is less a clear path forward than a set of productive tensions that must be held. The framework offers pragmatic value within Western contexts while Aboriginal epistemologies reveal its cultural specificity and limitations. Aboriginal wisdom offers profound understanding of right relationship while the IDG reveals challenges in translating this wisdom across ontological difference within colonial institutional realities. Neither framework can replace or subsume the other; both illuminate what the other cannot see about itself.

The question is not which framework is correct but how to honor both—maintaining their distinctiveness, acknowledging power imbalances, creating genuine dialogue while resisting appropriation, and allowing each to serve the contexts and purposes for which it emerged. This is the both/and that the Ganma metaphor points toward: not synthesis but respectful engagement across difference, not resolution but productive tension, not one framework saving the world but multiple knowledge systems, each with integrity, each offering wisdom, each learning from encounter with what it is not.

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Part III has explored what each framework reveals about the other's strengths, limitations, and cultural specificity. Indigenous epistemologies illuminate the IDG's blind spots—its industrial logic, its testimony to modern alienation, its universalizing gesture, its temporal and spatial assumptions, its significant exclusions, and its action-orientation. The IDG framework, in turn, reveals challenges in Indigenous-settler knowledge relations—pragmatic accessibility needs, translation difficulties, urgency tensions, Indigenous peoples' navigation of colonial realities, and possibilities for genuine two-way engagement. Part IV will explore constructive possibilities and necessary limits, asking what genuinely relational development might look like while respecting where frameworks cannot and should not be reconciled.

# Part IV: Toward Relationality-Informed Development

## 9. WHAT WOULD GENUINELY RELATIONAL DEVELOPMENT LOOK LIKE?

### Starting with place and Country

If we took Aboriginal relational ontology seriously as a foundation for transformation work, the first and most fundamental shift would be centering place. Development would begin not with abstract goals or individual assessments but with specific relationships to land, waterways, and more-than-human kin. The primary questions would shift from "What competencies do individuals need?" to "What does this Country need? What are our obligations here? What is this place teaching?"

This represents a profound reorientation. The IDG framework assumes development can happen anywhere—in corporate headquarters, retreat centers, online platforms. Location is merely setting, providing convenience or atmosphere but not essential to the work itself. Aboriginal epistemologies insist that transformation is fundamentally emplaced. One cannot develop in abstract space; one can only participate in relationship with specific Country.

The Bawaka collective's work demonstrates what this looks like in practice. Their collaborative research and writing emerge from walking on Bawaka, digging ganguri, attending to what the place reveals. Knowledge doesn't come from applying frameworks to situations but from Country teaching through direct engagement. The women, the yams, the sand, the digging sticks, the seasons—all co-become through this emplaced participation.

For development work informed by this understanding, the first step would be learning whose Country one is on. For settlers on stolen land, this means acknowledging the Indigenous peoples whose territories one occupies, recognizing that one's presence there comes with obligations not yet fulfilled. It means asking what it would mean to be in right relationship with this specific place given the violence of dispossession that enables one's presence.

For Indigenous peoples, it means restoring and maintaining relationship with traditional Country even when colonial systems have disrupted access and damaged ecosystems. It means centering development work in the knowledge systems and practices appropriate to specific places rather than applying generic frameworks.

For both settlers and Indigenous peoples, it means treating land not as abstract "environment" or "nature" but as specific Country with its own integrity, agency, and teaching. Development becomes less about individuals acquiring competencies and more about communities learning to listen to what places need and fulfill obligations to maintain right relationship.

## Centering collective rather than individual

If relational ontology is taken seriously, development work would shift from individual competence-building to collective capacity for maintaining right relationship. This doesn't mean individuals don't learn and grow, but their development would be understood as embedded in and serving collective wellbeing rather than as primary end in itself.

Martin's framework emphasizes this: "no one person or Entity knows all, but each has sets of knowledges to fulfil particular roles. These roles are gender specific and directed by life stage." Development in this context means learning what one's role requires, understanding one's kinship position and its obligations, gaining the knowledge appropriate to one's life stage and relationships. The focus is not comprehensive individual development of all 25 qualities but differentiated participation in collective patterns.

This has significant implications for how development is resourced and organized. Instead of individual training programs, investments would go toward collective processes—supporting Elder transmission of knowledge to younger generations, creating conditions for ceremony and cultural practice, enabling communities to spend time on Country together, strengthening kinship structures that distribute wisdom and responsibility appropriately.

Organizations approaching development from this perspective would assess not individual competencies but collective capacity to maintain right relationship. Questions would include: How does our organization embody reciprocity? What are our kinship obligations to the lands we occupy and the communities we affect? How is wisdom distributed across our collective, and are Elders appropriately honored? How do we listen to what places and more-than-human entities teach about what we should be doing?

These questions don't map neatly onto the IDG framework's 25 qualities because they emerge from different ontology. They don't assume individuals who develop skills but collectives that enact relationships. They don't measure progress toward goals but assess ongoing participation in patterns that maintain balance.

## Restoration rather than building

From Aboriginal perspective, much of what Western frameworks call "development" would be better understood as restoration. The work is not building new capacities but restoring relationships damaged by colonialism, capitalism, and industrialization. People don't lack connection to land, ancestors, and more-than-human kin; they have been violently disconnected. The work is healing, not development.

Graham articulates this when she describes how Western society's "discrete individual whirling in space" experiences such profound "spiritual loneliness and alienation" that it must arm itself against environment and others. The problem is not insufficient development but damage to the relational fabric that constitutes healthy being. Yunkaporta makes a similar point: "What needs changing are the patterns of relationship that make our current civilization destructive and fragile."

Development work informed by this understanding would focus on removing barriers to relationship rather than building new competencies. It would ask: What colonial structures enforce separation? What economic systems require treating land as commodity? What

educational practices fragment persons from place and kinship? What governance systems prevent communities from making decisions according to relational wisdom?

Answering these questions leads to very different interventions than the IDG framework suggests. Instead of meditation training to develop presence, work would focus on creating conditions where people can spend time on Country without economic precarity. Instead of perspective-taking exercises to build empathy, work would focus on restoring kinship structures that naturally generate care through obligation. Instead of values clarification to develop inner compass, work would focus on reconnecting people to land, ancestors, and communities that provide guidance.

This doesn't mean practices like meditation or reflection have no value. But their value would be understood as supporting restoration of right relationship rather than developing individual interior capacities. Practices serve collective healing rather than individual optimization.

Critically, restoration work must be led by Indigenous peoples whose knowledge systems maintain understanding of right relationship with specific Countries. For settlers, the work is primarily about getting out of the way, returning land and resources, supporting Indigenous authority rather than appropriating Indigenous wisdom to enhance settler effectiveness.

## Distribution rather than accumulation

Aboriginal epistemologies emphasize distribution of knowledge, responsibility, and authority across communities rather than accumulation in individuals. This challenges the IDG framework's implicit model where individuals accumulate all 25 qualities, becoming comprehensively developed change agents.

Martin describes how different people hold different knowledge according to their kinship position, life stage, and gender. Elders hold knowledge appropriate to their role; younger people hold different knowledge. Women's knowledge differs from men's knowledge. No one person possesses all knowledge, and attempting to do so would violate proper patterns of distribution.

This model has profound implications for development work. Instead of trying to develop all competencies in all people, attention would go to ensuring appropriate distribution across collectives. Organizations would ask: Who holds what knowledge? Are Elders properly positioned to guide? Is authority distributed according to wisdom rather than concentrated according to hierarchy? How do we ensure young people receive transmission from Elders while Elders receive care from younger generations?

The Bawaka collective's collaborative work demonstrates this distribution in practice. Knowledge emerges through the collective including human and more-than-human participants—the women, the ancestors, the land, the entities with whom they are in relationship. No individual is the primary knower; knowledge arises through the web of relationships.

Development programs informed by this understanding would resist the urge to create individual experts or comprehensively trained leaders. Instead, they would support communities in distributing wisdom, responsibility, and authority appropriately. The goal is not individuals who possess all competencies but collectives where knowledge and capacity are rightly distributed across generations, genders, kinship groups, and human/more-than-human relationships.

This also means recognizing that some knowledge should not be shared widely. Not everything is open to everyone. Knowledge has proper relationships and boundaries. Development in this context includes learning what one should know and what one should not, what one has right to teach and what one should respectfully leave to those who hold that knowledge properly.

## Reciprocity rather than extraction

A fundamental principle for relational development would be reciprocity: any process of learning or development must give back more than it takes. This challenges typical development models where experts extract knowledge from communities, practitioners learn from Indigenous peoples, or individuals gain competencies through consuming resources.

Martin emphasizes reciprocity as core to Aboriginal Ways of Being: "We are part of the world as much as it is part of us, existing within a network of relations amongst Entities that are reciprocal." Development processes would need to embody this reciprocity structurally, not just aspire to it as a value.

What would this look like in practice? If Western organizations want to learn from Indigenous epistemologies about relational consciousness, reciprocity would require returning land, resources, and authority to Indigenous communities. Not symbolic gestures but material redistribution that addresses ongoing dispossession. Not extracting wisdom to make settlers more effective but supporting Indigenous sovereignty and self-determination.

If individuals want to develop through relationship with land, reciprocity would require contributing to that land's wellbeing. Not just feeling grateful or connected but participating in practices that restore and maintain ecosystem health. This might mean learning from Indigenous land managers about cultural burning, supporting native plant restoration, or simply getting out of the way so Indigenous peoples can maintain their relationships with Country.

For development programs themselves, reciprocity would mean ensuring that communities hosting programs benefit more than facilitators or participants. Resources would flow toward community priorities, especially supporting Elders and knowledge transmission. Intellectual property would belong to communities, not consultants. Decision-making authority would rest with those whose knowledge informs the work.

This principle directly challenges extractive development models where Indigenous knowledge is appropriated to enhance Western effectiveness, where consultants profit from teaching Indigenous-inspired practices, where frameworks incorporate Indigenous concepts while maintaining Western ownership and authority.

## Ceremony and ritual as essential

Aboriginal epistemologies recognize ceremony and ritual as essential to transformation and maintenance of right relationship. This is not decoration or cultural enrichment but fundamental technology for connecting with ancestors, spirits, Country, and each other in ways that sustain life across generations.

The IDG framework has no dimension addressing ceremony or ritual. This exclusion reveals its secular humanist assumptions—that transformation happens primarily through individual psychological work, cognitive training, and behavioral practice. But Aboriginal cultures

understand ceremony as the primary means through which right relationship is enacted and maintained.

Yunkaporta describes ceremony as not historical reenactment but renewed participation in patterns that connect ancestors, present community, and descendants. The Bawaka collective writes about how gurrutu is performed and practiced, how kinship bonds are enacted through ceremony that maintains the web connecting all beings.

Development work informed by this understanding would center ceremony and ritual as essential practices. This doesn't mean appropriating specific Aboriginal ceremonies—that would violate the principle of respecting what knowledge belongs to whom. But it means recognizing that transformation requires more than individual reflection and cognitive learning. It requires collective practices that enact and renew relationship.

For Indigenous communities, this means supporting continuation and restoration of traditional ceremonies disrupted by colonialism. For settlers, it might mean developing new ceremonies appropriate to their positioning—rituals of acknowledgment, practices of asking permission, ceremonies of giving back. These would not mimic Indigenous practices but would acknowledge ceremony's essential role in transformation.

Organizational contexts might include regular practices that enact collective values and relationships rather than just discussing them. These might draw on various traditions while respecting their origins, creating spaces where transformation happens through collective enactment rather than individual learning alone.

## Waiting and listening as primary practices

Perhaps the most challenging reorientation for Western-trained practitioners would be centering waiting and listening rather than action and development. Aboriginal Ways of Knowing include "listening, sensing, viewing, watching, waiting" as essential processes through which knowledge emerges.

The Bawaka collective emphasizes listening to Country: "We read it every day, every minute, every moment." This reading requires attention, patience, and respect for the fact that Country teaches in its own time. One cannot force knowledge through aggressive inquiry; one must wait for it to be revealed through relationship.

Development work informed by this principle would include significant time for waiting and listening rather than constant activity. Programs would create space for people to simply be present on Country, to observe without immediate purpose, to listen without agenda. The assumption would be that knowledge emerges through this respectful attention rather than through designed interventions and structured activities.

This challenges Western action-orientation where doing is valued over being, where results are demanded on predetermined timelines, where efficiency is paramount. Aboriginal epistemologies suggest that genuine transformation may require what looks like inefficiency from Western perspective—long periods of observation, patient waiting for right timing, allowing processes to unfold according to their own logic rather than imposed schedules.

For practitioners trained to design interventions, facilitate processes, and produce outcomes, this requires profound humility and restraint. It means acknowledging that one's expertise may be less valuable than simply creating conditions for people to listen to what Country, Elders, and more-than-human beings teach. It means accepting that some of the most important development work is removing oneself as intermediary and supporting direct relationship between people and land.

## Practical examples and implementation challenges

What might these principles look like in actual practice? A few examples, with acknowledgment that real implementation would need to be led by Indigenous peoples and adapted to specific contexts:

**Land-based learning programs:** Rather than classroom or retreat center settings, development work happens on Country. Participants spend extended time in specific places, learning to listen to what land teaches. For settlers, this includes learning whose Country they're on and what obligations their presence creates. Indigenous Elders guide where appropriate and when they choose to share knowledge. The land itself is recognized as primary teacher.

**Intergenerational knowledge transmission:** Resources support Elders in sharing knowledge with younger generations according to traditional patterns rather than Western educational models. This includes creating economic conditions that allow time for this transmission, supporting languages in which knowledge is properly carried, and respecting that some knowledge is shared only at certain life stages.

**Ceremonial restoration and creation:** For Indigenous communities, support for maintaining and restoring traditional ceremonies. For settler communities, support for developing appropriate rituals that acknowledge positioning on stolen land and enact commitments to reciprocity and restoration. Both honor ceremony as essential rather than optional.

**Collective accountability processes:** Instead of individual performance reviews, communities assess how well they are maintaining right relationship with each other, land, and more-than-human beings. Questions focus on collective patterns rather than individual competencies, on relationship quality rather than measurable outcomes.

**Resource redistribution:** Significant resources flow from dominant institutions back to Indigenous communities, supporting Indigenous-led development work according to Indigenous priorities rather than Western frameworks.

The implementation challenges are substantial. These approaches don't fit easily within existing organizational structures, funding timelines, or accountability frameworks. They require patience that quarterly reporting doesn't accommodate, distributed authority that hierarchies resist, and material redistribution that threatens established power.

Moreover, there is constant risk of appropriation—settlers taking these principles and applying them in ways that benefit settlers while continuing to marginalize Indigenous peoples. The only real safeguard is Indigenous leadership and authority over how these principles are understood and applied.

Perhaps most challenging, these approaches require accepting that transformation may not happen on timescales Western institutions demand. Restoring right relationship after centuries of colonial violence is multi-generational work. Building collective capacity to listen to Country and fulfill obligations appropriately takes time that urgent crises seem not to allow.

Yet Aboriginal peoples have survived and maintained relationships with Country through catastrophic changes precisely because their approaches work across deep time rather than optimizing for short-term results. The question is whether Western institutions can develop the humility and patience to learn from this wisdom rather than demanding that it prove itself according to Western timescales and metrics.

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# 10. THE LIMITS OF RECONCILIATION: WHEN FRAMEWORKS CANNOT BE SYNTHESIZED

## Irreconcilable ontological differences

Throughout this essay, we have explored tensions between the IDG framework and Aboriginal epistemologies. Some of these tensions might be productive—creative friction that generates new understanding. But some represent fundamentally incommensurable worldviews that cannot and should not be reconciled.

The most basic incommensurability is ontological: the IDG framework assumes bounded individuals who develop capacities, while Aboriginal ontologies understand persons as constituted by relationships. These are not different perspectives on the same reality that can be synthesized into higher understanding. They are different realities emerging from incompatible ontological premises.

One cannot simultaneously hold that the self is fundamentally autonomous and that the self is fundamentally relational. One cannot treat development as individual competence-building while also understanding transformation as collective restoration of right relationship. One cannot frame knowledge as cognitive skill while also recognizing knowledge as emplaced participation with Country as teacher.

The IDG framework's emphasis on both/and thinking suggests these differences might be integrated. But the Ganma metaphor insists otherwise: fresh water and salt water remain distinct even as they mix. Aboriginal and Western ontologies are "separate and opposed parts of one whole"—not because one is right and the other wrong, but because they emerge from fundamentally different understandings of what reality is.

This incommensurability is not a problem to be solved but a reality to be respected. Attempts to reconcile or synthesize may only distort both frameworks, creating something that appears to honor both but actually does justice to neither. The fresh water becomes less fresh, the salt water less salty, and what emerges is muddy compromise rather than the creative foam that genuine engagement across difference can generate.

## Linear progress versus cyclical regeneration

The temporal incommensurability runs deep. Western developmental frameworks, including the IDG, assume time moves linearly from past through present to future, and that development means progress from less to more. Aboriginal temporal ontologies understand time as cyclical, recursive, and regenerative.

These cannot be reconciled because they structure experience fundamentally differently. If time is linear, then the work is moving forward toward goals not yet achieved. If time is cyclical, then the work is participating in patterns that have always existed and will continue. These orientations lead to entirely different approaches to learning, change, and transformation.

The IDG framework can acknowledge cyclical patterns and regenerative processes, but its core logic remains progressive—identifying current state, setting goals for development, measuring

movement toward those goals. This is linear temporality however much it acknowledges cycles within that linearity.

Aboriginal temporal ontologies cannot be reduced to stages within Western developmental frameworks. Gurrutu's recursive patterns where the baby is mother to the old woman, where ancestors and descendants are present now, where ceremony renews participation in eternal patterns—this is not a more sophisticated understanding of developmental stages but a fundamentally different temporal reality.

Attempts to reconcile these temporalities risk imposing Western linear logic on Aboriginal cyclical understanding, treating regenerative patterns as if they were developmental stages, assuming that cyclical time is a less sophisticated version of linear progress. Such reconciliation would be violence through assimilation rather than genuine engagement across difference.

## Individual competence versus collective relationship

The IDG framework's structure assumes individuals are the primary units of development. Even when it addresses collective concerns, the pathway is through individual competence-building. Individuals develop their capacities and then apply them in collaborative contexts.

Aboriginal ontologies understand collectives as primary, with individuals emerging through and participating in collective patterns. This is not just different emphasis but different ontology. Gurrutu doesn't describe how individuals relate; it describes the relational structure through which individuals come to exist.

These understandings cannot be synthesized because they answer the question "What is primary—individual or collective?" in opposite ways. The IDG framework can value collective contexts and purposes while maintaining individual development as the mechanism. Aboriginal frameworks can recognize individual particularity while maintaining relationship as ontologically prior.

But these remain fundamentally incompatible answers to the question of what is real and what is derivative. One framework treats individuals as real and relationships as what individuals create. The other treats relationships as real and individuals as what relationships constitute. These are not complementary perspectives that together reveal fuller truth; they are competing ontologies that cannot both be ultimate.

## Portable skills versus emplaced knowledge

The incommensurability extends to epistemology. The IDG framework assumes knowledge and competencies are portable—once developed, individuals carry them across contexts. Aboriginal epistemologies understand knowledge as fundamentally emplaced—inseparable from specific Country, relationships, and entities.

This is not merely different theory of knowledge but different understanding of what knowledge is. For the IDG, knowledge is something individuals possess in their minds or embody in their behaviors. For Aboriginal frameworks, knowledge is embedded in land, held by ancestors, enacted through ceremony, distributed across human and more-than-human communities.

These epistemologies cannot be reconciled because one treats knowledge as primarily in individual minds while the other treats knowledge as primarily in relationships and places. The IDG can acknowledge that context matters and that knowledge is often situated, but its core logic remains that individuals develop competencies they can apply across contexts. Aboriginal epistemologies insist that what one knows cannot be separated from where one is, who one is in relationship with, and what obligations one carries.

Attempts to reconcile these epistemologies risk extracting Aboriginal knowledge from its place and treating it as portable wisdom that anyone can learn anywhere. This is precisely the colonial violence Aboriginal peoples resist—the assumption that their knowledge can be abstracted from Country and relationships, packaged into frameworks, and transmitted to anyone willing to learn.

## The danger of appropriation disguised as integration

Perhaps the most important limit to reconciliation is the risk that attempts at integration become appropriation. When Western frameworks incorporate Indigenous concepts while maintaining Western structures and assumptions, they may appear to honor Indigenous wisdom while actually distorting and extracting it.

The IDG framework includes values that resonate with Indigenous cultures—serving the whole, caring for future generations, recognizing interdependence. But it includes them within Western ontological structures that assume individual development, cognitive skills, and progressive stages. The result might be appropriation: taking Indigenous values to enhance Western effectiveness while maintaining Western dominance.

Martin warns against exactly this: "Otherwise it is western research done by Indigenous people." The same applies to development frameworks. If the IDG incorporates Indigenous perspectives while maintaining its fundamental Western structure, it remains a Western framework regardless of how many Indigenous voices contributed to it.

True respect for Indigenous epistemologies requires accepting their otherness, their refusal to fit within Western categories, their insistence on their own integrity and authority. This means acknowledging where they cannot be integrated into Western frameworks without being fundamentally distorted.

The Ganma metaphor's insistence that fresh and salt water remain distinct even in mixing is crucial here. The waters don't merge into homogeneous solution. They interact, they create foam at their interface, but each maintains its essence. Applied to the IDG and Aboriginal frameworks, this means accepting that they cannot be synthesized without one subsuming the other.

## When to use which framework

Rather than attempting reconciliation, perhaps what's needed is clear discernment about when each framework appropriately applies. The IDG framework might serve Western institutional contexts where individualist ontology dominates and where pragmatic accessible frameworks enable conversations about inner development that otherwise wouldn't happen.

Aboriginal epistemologies guide Indigenous communities and inform work on Indigenous lands. They offer profound wisdom to settlers willing to engage respectfully, but this engagement cannot mean extracting concepts to enhance settler frameworks. It means deferring to Indigenous authority, supporting Indigenous sovereignty, and changing settler behavior rather than improving settler competence.

For settlers working in Western institutions, the IDG framework might be appropriate tool while Aboriginal epistemologies serve as critique that reveals the framework's limitations and cultural specificity. The critique doesn't make the framework useless but contextualizes it—this is one approach among many, serving particular purposes in particular contexts, not universal truth about human development.

For Indigenous peoples navigating colonial institutions, both frameworks might be useful in different ways—the IDG as translation interface that enables engagement with Western systems, Aboriginal frameworks as the grounding that maintains cultural integrity and guides ultimate purposes.

The key is not assuming one framework should replace the other or that they should merge into synthesis. Rather, each serves different contexts and purposes, and wisdom lies in knowing which applies when and being honest about their incompatibilities.

## The political stakes of epistemological difference

These are not merely academic questions about competing theories. They are political questions with material consequences. Which frameworks guide policy, allocate resources, and structure institutions determines whose knowledge is valued, who has authority, and how power flows.

Currently, Western frameworks like the IDG operate from positions of institutional power. They are taken seriously in government, corporate, educational, and international development contexts. Indigenous epistemologies must constantly justify themselves against Western standards, prove their relevance in Western terms, and fight for recognition.

Genuine decolonization would require reversing these power relations. Indigenous epistemologies would guide decisions about Indigenous lands and communities. Western frameworks would need to justify themselves to Indigenous standards when operating in Indigenous contexts. The burden of translation and adaptation would shift from Indigenous peoples to Western institutions.

This is not merely adding Indigenous representation to Western frameworks or incorporating Indigenous values into Western processes. It is fundamentally redistributing epistemic authority—acknowledging that different knowledge systems have primary authority in different contexts, and that Western knowledge systems do not have universal jurisdiction.

The IDG framework, despite good intentions, participates in structures that privilege Western epistemology. Its claim to comprehensiveness, its presentation as universally applicable, its operation through Western institutional channels—all of this maintains Western epistemic dominance even as it includes Indigenous voices and values.

Respecting the limits of reconciliation means accepting that the IDG framework should not operate in Indigenous contexts unless Indigenous peoples choose to use it, and even then,

Indigenous frameworks should maintain primary authority. It means acknowledging that when the IDG framework and Aboriginal epistemologies conflict, the conflict cannot be resolved by synthesis that preserves Western dominance.

## What genuine respect requires

Respecting irreconcilable differences requires specific commitments and restraints:

**From the IDG framework and its proponents:**

- Acknowledging cultural specificity rather than claiming universality
- Recognizing that Indigenous epistemologies cannot be reduced to IDG categories
- Deferring to Indigenous authority on Indigenous knowledge and lands
- Resisting the urge to incorporate or improve Indigenous concepts
- Supporting Indigenous sovereignty and self-determination materially, not just rhetorically
- Accepting that the framework should not be applied in Indigenous contexts without Indigenous leadership
- Being honest about tensions that cannot be resolved rather than claiming false synthesis

**From those engaging both frameworks:**

- Learning to hold incommensurability rather than forcing resolution
- Recognizing when each framework appropriately applies
- Resisting appropriation of Indigenous knowledge to enhance Western practice
- Supporting Indigenous-led development work according to Indigenous priorities
- Changing one's own behavior and institutions rather than extracting Indigenous wisdom for personal development
- Accepting that some knowledge is not meant to be shared and some differences are not meant to be bridged

**From Western institutions:**

- Redistributing resources to Indigenous communities and projects
- Returning land and authority to Indigenous peoples
- Changing structures that require Indigenous knowledge to fit Western categories
- Supporting Indigenous languages, ceremonies, and knowledge transmission
- Accepting Indigenous authority in Indigenous contexts
- Dismantling systems that enforce separation from land and relationship

These commitments are not abstract principles but concrete actions with material consequences. They require Western frameworks and institutions to accept limits to their authority and scope. They require individuals to change behavior rather than just consciousness. They require structural transformation rather than just personal development.

## The both/and that requires separation

Paradoxically, genuine respect for both frameworks may require maintaining their separation more than seeking their integration. The Ganma metaphor suggests this: fresh and salt water create foam at their meeting, but the foam depends on the waters remaining distinct. If they

merged completely, there would be no generative tension, no creative possibility emerging from difference.

Applied to the IDG framework and Aboriginal epistemologies, this means:

- Each framework maintains its integrity rather than being distorted through forced synthesis
- Engagement happens at interfaces where both are present but distinct
- The creative possibilities emerge from tension rather than resolution
- Power imbalances are acknowledged and addressed rather than ignored
- Each framework operates with its own authority in appropriate contexts
- Neither claims to subsume or improve the other

This is difficult to hold in practice. Western institutions prefer synthesis, integration, and comprehensive frameworks. The idea that some differences should be maintained rather than resolved challenges assumptions about progress and unity. But Aboriginal epistemologies insist on this maintenance of difference as essential to integrity.

The question is whether Western frameworks can develop the humility to accept this. Can the IDG operate without claiming universality? Can it acknowledge that it is one framework among many, serving particular purposes in particular contexts, without ultimate authority over human development? Can it respect Aboriginal epistemologies enough to leave them alone rather than attempting to incorporate them?

If so, then genuine engagement becomes possible—not synthesis but dialogue, not resolution but creative tension, not one framework saving the world but multiple knowledge systems, each with integrity, each offering wisdom where it properly applies, each transformed through encounter with what it cannot be.

If not, then the IDG framework risks becoming another colonial project, however unintentionally—extracting Indigenous wisdom to enhance Western effectiveness while maintaining Western dominance, claiming inclusivity while enforcing assimilation, gesturing toward both/and while actually privileging Western ontologies.

The limits of reconciliation are not failures but necessary boundaries. They protect integrity, honor difference, and create conditions for genuine engagement across incommensurability. Respecting these limits is not giving up on transformation but recognizing that transformation may require maintaining distinctions rather than forcing unity, holding tensions rather than resolving them, and accepting that some waters should remain separate even as they meet.

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Part IV has explored what genuinely relational development might look like—centering place, prioritizing collective over individual, focusing on restoration rather than building, distributing rather than accumulating, embodying reciprocity, honoring ceremony, and valuing waiting and listening. It has also examined the limits of reconciliation between the IDG framework and Aboriginal epistemologies, identifying irreconcilable ontological, temporal, epistemological, and political differences that should be respected rather than forced into synthesis. The conclusion will bring together the essay's key insights and offer final reflections on inner development and "saving the world" from Indigenous and Western perspectives.

# Conclusion: Toward Epistemic Humility in Saving the World

## What this examination has revealed

This essay began with a question about how the Inner Development Goals framework appears when viewed through Aboriginal and Indigenous epistemological lenses. What emerged was not simply a critique of one framework or an endorsement of another, but a deeper understanding of how profoundly ontology shapes what we can see, what we value, and what we imagine transformation to be.

The IDG framework, for all its comprehensiveness and good intentions, emerges from and reinforces a particular Western ontological stance. It assumes bounded individuals who develop capacities through intentional practice, progressing from less to more capable states. It treats the self as fundamentally autonomous, knowledge as primarily cognitive, development as linear progress, and transformation as something individuals achieve through effort. These assumptions are so embedded in Western culture that they typically remain invisible, appearing as simply how things are rather than one cultural construction among many.

Aboriginal epistemologies—particularly the frameworks of gurrutu, Ways of Knowing/Being/Doing, co-becoming with Country, and Ganma—reveal these assumptions as culturally specific rather than universal. They demonstrate that persons can be understood as fundamentally relational rather than autonomous, that knowledge can be emplaced and distributed rather than portable and individual, that transformation can be cyclical and regenerative rather than linear and progressive, and that change can emerge through collective restoration of right relationship rather than individual competence-building.

The tensions between these frameworks are not merely differences in emphasis or perspective. They represent fundamentally incommensurable ontologies—different understandings of what is real, what matters, and how transformation happens. These differences cannot be easily reconciled through synthesis or integration. The fresh water and salt water remain distinct even as they meet and mix.

## The IDG framework's contributions and limitations

It is important to acknowledge what the IDG framework offers within its cultural context. It provides accessible language for discussing inner development in Western institutional settings where such conversations might not otherwise happen. It comprehensively maps capacities needed for addressing complex challenges. It creates practical pathways for individuals and organizations to engage with questions of consciousness, values, and relational capacity. Within Western contexts dominated by purely technical and instrumental rationality, the framework represents genuine progress toward more holistic understanding.

The framework's emphasis on serving the good of the whole, caring for future generations, and recognizing interdependence resonates with Indigenous values even if the ontological grounding differs. Its recognition that some qualities—particularly Connectedness, Inner Compass, and Humility—are "identifications" rather than merely trainable skills suggests implicit

awareness that development touches questions of identity and being, not just behavior and competence.

For people shaped by Western individualism who genuinely do not feel connected to larger wholes, who struggle with self-awareness and presence, who need support in developing collaborative capacities—the IDG framework provides valuable guidance. Within the reality of colonial disconnection, practices that help people experience relationship have merit even if they don't address root causes of that disconnection.

Yet when viewed through Aboriginal epistemological lenses, the framework's limitations become starkly visible. Its very structure—identifying gaps, developing skills, measuring progress—participates in industrial logic that treats humans as resources to be optimized. Its emphasis on individual development reinforces the separate self that Aboriginal ontologies understand as the problem rather than the solution. Its progressive temporality mirrors capitalist imperatives of endless growth rather than regenerative cycles of maintenance and renewal.

Most significantly, the framework's claim to comprehensiveness and broad applicability erases radical difference. By synthesizing diverse perspectives into unified categories, it filters out what doesn't fit Western ontological assumptions. Gurrutu becomes "Connectedness," Ways of Being become "Inner Compass," relationship with Country becomes "Long-term Orientation"—in each case, profound Aboriginal understanding is reduced to Western developmental categories, losing its ontological specificity and cultural integrity in translation.

The framework excludes or marginalizes what is most essential from Aboriginal perspectives: ceremony, ancestors, spirits, more-than-human teachers, emplaced knowledge, distributed wisdom, patient listening, and cyclical regeneration. These are not gaps that could be filled by adding new dimensions but fundamental incompatibilities revealing the framework's cultural boundaries.

## What Aboriginal epistemologies offer

Aboriginal and Indigenous epistemologies offer more than critique of Western frameworks. They offer ancient and ongoing wisdom about how to live in right relationship across deep time. They demonstrate that humans can sustain themselves and their lands not for decades or centuries but for tens of thousands of years when relationships are properly maintained.

The concept of gurrutu reveals that complex systems of kinship extending infinitely through space and time can structure societies in ways that maintain balance and distribute responsibility appropriately. Ways of Knowing/Being/Doing show that persons can be understood as constituted through relationship rather than as autonomous agents, and that this relational ontology generates naturally what Western frameworks struggle to develop—care, humility, long-term thinking, and connection.

Co-becoming with Country demonstrates that transformation happens through participatory relationship with place rather than through abstract individual development. The land teaches, seasons guide, more-than-human entities share wisdom, and persons emerge through these relationships rather than entering them as fully formed individuals.

The Ganma metaphor offers crucial guidance for engagement across difference: fresh and salt water can meet and mix while each maintains its distinctiveness, creating foam—new know-

ledge—at their interface without either water losing its essence. This model respects incommensurability while enabling genuine dialogue.

Most importantly, Aboriginal epistemologies challenge the very premise of "saving the world" that underlies the IDG framework. As Yunkaporta writes, "The world doesn't actually need us to 'save' it. The planet and Life-as-such have navigated collapse and regeneration many times. What needs changing are the patterns of relationship that make our current civilization destructive and fragile."

This reframes the entire project. The work is not developing more competent individuals who will rescue a world in crisis. The work is recognizing that humans are the world healing itself, that restoration of right relationship is already happening through Indigenous peoples maintaining their connections with Country, and that the primary task for settlers is getting out of the way, returning land and resources, and learning humility rather than accumulating competencies.

## The political is epistemological

Throughout this examination, we have seen that choices about development frameworks are not neutral or merely practical. They are political choices with material consequences. Which frameworks guide policy, allocate resources, and structure institutions determines whose knowledge is valued, who has authority, and how power flows.

The IDG framework, despite genuine efforts at inclusion and consultation, operates from and reinforces Western institutional power. It speaks the language of institutions that control resources, make policy, and shape culture. Its accessibility within these contexts is both its strength and its complicity with structures that marginalize Indigenous epistemologies.

Genuine decolonization requires more than incorporating Indigenous perspectives into Western frameworks. It requires redistributing epistemic authority—acknowledging that Indigenous knowledge systems have primary jurisdiction over Indigenous lands and communities, that Western frameworks should defer to Indigenous authority in Indigenous contexts, and that the burden of translation and adaptation should shift from Indigenous peoples to Western institutions.

This means the IDG framework acknowledging its cultural specificity rather than claiming universality. It means recognizing that its 25 skills and qualities represent one approach among many, valid within certain contexts but not comprehensive or superior. It means accepting that the framework should not be applied in Indigenous contexts without Indigenous leadership and may not be appropriate at all where it conflicts with Indigenous knowledge systems.

It also means material action, not just respectful rhetoric. Returning land to Indigenous peoples. Redistributing resources to support Indigenous-led development according to Indigenous priorities. Changing Western institutional structures that require Indigenous knowledge to fit Western categories. Supporting Indigenous languages, ceremonies, and knowledge transmission. Accepting Indigenous authority and sovereignty not as consultative input but as ultimate decision-making power in appropriate contexts.

These are not additions to the IDG framework but challenges to the systems within which it operates. They cannot be accomplished through individual inner development alone but require collective political transformation that addresses ongoing colonial violence and dispossession.

## Implications for practice

For those working with the IDG framework, this examination suggests several implications:

**Acknowledge cultural specificity:** Present the framework as one approach among many, emerging from Western ontological assumptions, serving particular contexts, not claiming to map all that matters for human development.

**Recognize limits:** Be honest about what the framework cannot address—emplaced knowledge, distributed wisdom, ceremony and ritual, relationship with ancestors and spirits, more-than-human teachers, cyclical regeneration, collective restoration of right relationship.

**Defer to Indigenous authority:** When working in or with Indigenous communities, follow Indigenous frameworks. Don't attempt to apply the IDG or incorporate Indigenous concepts into it. Support Indigenous-led work according to Indigenous priorities.

**Support material change:** Use whatever influence the framework provides to advocate for land return, resource redistribution, and structural changes that support Indigenous sovereignty. Don't extract Indigenous wisdom to make Western individuals more competent.

**Hold tensions:** Resist the urge to synthesize or reconcile when genuine engagement requires maintaining distinctions. Let Aboriginal epistemologies critique and limit the framework without trying to integrate that critique into the framework itself.

For those working from or engaging with Indigenous epistemologies:

**Maintain integrity:** Don't allow Indigenous concepts to be reduced to Western categories or absorbed into frameworks that strip them of ontological specificity. Insist on distinctiveness and authority.

**Lead transformation:** When Indigenous peoples choose to engage with Western frameworks, do so strategically on your own terms, maintaining Indigenous knowledge systems as primary and using Western frameworks only as translation interfaces when useful.

**Teach on your terms:** Share knowledge when and how it serves Indigenous futures, not when and how it enhances settler effectiveness. Set boundaries around what is shared, with whom, and under what conditions.

**Demand reciprocity:** Any engagement with Western institutions should provide material benefits to Indigenous communities—land return, resource redistribution, support for sovereignty—not just recognition or inclusion.

For settlers navigating between frameworks:

**Learn positioning:** Understand yourself as settler on stolen land with obligations not yet fulfilled. This is not guilt to be transcended through development but reality to be acknowledged and addressed through action.

**Listen more than speak:** Prioritize learning from Indigenous peoples and supporting Indigenous-led work over developing your own capacities or sharing your insights.

**Change behavior, not just consciousness:** Focus on material actions—supporting land return, redistributing resources, changing institutions—rather than primarily on developing inner connection or awareness.

**Accept limits:** Some knowledge is not for you. Some differences should not be bridged. Some tensions should not be resolved. This is not failure but respect.

## Two ontologies of saving the world

Perhaps the deepest difference between the IDG framework and Aboriginal epistemologies lies in their implicit answers to the question: What does it mean to save the world?

The IDG framework, emerging from Western activism and development traditions, assumes the world needs saving by competent humans. Global crises—climate change, inequality, conflict, ecological collapse—require humans to become more aware, more skilled, more collaborative, more capable of addressing complex challenges. If enough individuals develop the 25 qualities to sufficient levels, if enough organizations cultivate these capacities in their members, if enough leaders embody these qualities, then humanity might successfully navigate the crises we face.

This narrative is hopeful and empowering. It suggests that transformation is possible through human effort and that individuals can contribute meaningfully by developing themselves. It provides agency in the face of overwhelming challenges and clear pathways for action. Within Western contexts where people feel helpless or paralyzed by the scale of global problems, the IDG framework offers something concrete to do.

Aboriginal epistemologies suggest a fundamentally different understanding. The world has never needed saving by humans. Country has maintained itself through countless transformations across deep time. The current crises are not problems requiring human solution but symptoms of humans having broken right relationship—with land, with each other, with the more-than-human world. The work is not saving the world but restoring humans to proper participation in patterns that have always sustained life.

Graham's analysis reveals what underlies this difference: Western society's "discrete individual whirling in space" experiences such profound alienation that it must constantly prove its worth through heroic action. The need to save the world emerges from this existential loneliness. If one cannot feel connection, one can at least be useful. If one cannot belong, one can at least be competent.

Aboriginal ontology begins from belonging and connection as given. One doesn't need to save the world to prove one's worth because worth comes from kinship position and relationship, not from accomplishment. The work is not heroic individual achievement but faithful participation in collective patterns of reciprocity and care.

This has profound implications for how we approach global crises. From the IDG perspective, the urgency of climate change demands rapid development of human capacities to address it. We need more people with complexity awareness to understand it, more people with collaborative skills to work across differences, more people with courage to take necessary action. Time is short, and we must optimize human development to meet the challenge.

From Aboriginal perspective, the urgency of climate change reflects how thoroughly humans have violated right relationship with land. The solution is not developing more competent individuals but restoring collective relationship with Country. This means listening to what Indigenous peoples who have maintained right relationship for millennia are teaching. It means settlers getting out of the way, returning land and resources, changing economic systems that require extraction, dismantling political structures that enforce separation from place.

These are not complementary approaches that together form complete solution. They emerge from incompatible understandings of what the problem is. One sees insufficient human competence; the other sees broken relationship. One seeks to develop individuals; the other seeks to restore collectives to right participation in patterns larger than human.

## The question of time

Running through all the tensions between these frameworks is the question of time. The IDG framework's developmental logic assumes we can progress toward greater capability within timeframes that Western institutions accommodate—quarters, years, perhaps decades at most. Aboriginal epistemologies work across generations and millennia, understanding that right relationship is not achieved but maintained through ongoing practice across deep time.

The urgency of current crises seems to demand rapid transformation. We don't have time for multi-generational change when ecosystems are collapsing and climate is destabilizing. Yet Aboriginal peoples have navigated catastrophic changes precisely because their approaches work across deep time rather than optimizing for immediate results. Attempting to save the world quickly through competent individual action may be less effective than restoring right relationship patiently through collective practice, even if the latter takes longer than crises seem to allow.

This creates genuine dilemma with no easy resolution. The IDG framework's pragmatic accessibility may enable changes within Western institutions that buy time, reduce harm, or create conditions for deeper transformation. But if it substitutes for deeper work, if it allows people to feel they're addressing crises through individual development while systemic patterns remain unchanged, it may ultimately obstruct transformation more than enabling it.

Aboriginal epistemologies offer wisdom essential for long-term sustainability but may not translate into rapid institutional change within dominant systems. The question is whether we have time to do the deep work of restoring right relationship or whether we must accept interim approaches that work within current systems even as we recognize their limitations.

Perhaps the answer is both/and in a different sense than the IDG framework typically means. Both the framework's pragmatic approaches within existing institutions and Aboriginal epistemologies' deep transformation of relationship may be necessary—not as synthesis but as parallel efforts serving different purposes on different timescales, with the latter ultimately more important but the former potentially useful for navigating near-term challenges.

But this both/and requires that interim approaches don't substitute for fundamental transformation, that individual development doesn't distract from collective restoration, and that Western frameworks don't appropriate Indigenous wisdom while maintaining Western dominance. Whether such both/and is possible in practice remains uncertain.

## Toward epistemic humility

What this examination ultimately calls for is epistemic humility—recognition that no single framework, no matter how comprehensive or well-intentioned, can contain all that matters for human transformation and collective wellbeing. The IDG framework offers valuable contributions within its cultural context, but it is not universal truth about human development. Aboriginal epistemologies offer profound wisdom maintained across millennia, but engaging them requires respect for their cultural specificity and acknowledgment of their authority in appropriate contexts.

Epistemic humility means the IDG framework acknowledging what it cannot address, who it cannot speak for, and where it should not apply. It means Aboriginal epistemologies being honored in their distinctiveness rather than reduced to variations on Western themes. It means settlers accepting that some knowledge is not for them, that their role may be supporting Indigenous-led work rather than developing their own capacities, and that transformation may require getting out of the way rather than becoming more competent.

It means recognizing that the Ganma metaphor's insistence on fresh and salt water remaining distinct even as they mix is not failure of integration but necessary respect for difference. The foam created at their meeting—new knowledge emerging from genuine encounter—depends on each water maintaining its integrity. Forcing synthesis would destroy what makes engagement productive.

This epistemic humility is difficult for Western frameworks that aspire to comprehensiveness and universality. It requires accepting limits, deferring to other authorities, acknowledging that being culturally specific is not weakness but honesty. It requires shifting from "How can we make this framework more inclusive?" to "Where does this framework not apply, and who should have authority there?"

For Western-trained practitioners, this humility may be more important than any of the 25 qualities the IDG framework identifies. Without it, even highly developed individuals risk perpetuating colonial patterns—extracting knowledge, appropriating wisdom, claiming authority, maintaining dominance. With it, the framework might serve transitional purposes within Western contexts while supporting genuinely transformative work led by those whose epistemologies have sustained peoples and places across deep time.

## A final word on saving the world

This essay has examined the Inner Development Goals framework through Aboriginal and Indigenous epistemological lenses, revealing profound tensions and fundamental incommensurabilities alongside occasional points of resonance and possibility for engagement. We have seen how ontology shapes epistemology, how cultural assumptions structure what we can imagine, and how the very notion of "saving the world" reveals worldviews.

Perhaps the deepest teaching from this examination is that the question is not how to make ourselves more competent to save the world. The question is how to remember that we are the world saving itself through restored relationship.

From Aboriginal perspective, the world has always known how to heal, regenerate, and maintain balance. Country teaches this, ancestors demonstrate it, more-than-human beings embody it. The crises we face emerged from humans—specifically, from colonial, capitalist, industrial patterns—violating right relationship. The healing is already happening through Indigenous peoples maintaining their connections with Country, through land regenerating where it's given space, through communities restoring traditional practices.

The work for those shaped by Western frameworks is not developing competencies to rescue a world in crisis but learning humility to listen to what the world is already teaching through those who have never stopped maintaining right relationship. It is getting out of the way so that restoration can happen. It is returning what was stolen. It is changing the patterns that create destruction rather than optimizing individuals to manage destruction more skillfully.

The Inner Development Goals framework offers tools that may serve interim purposes, creating conversations and practices within Western institutions that move toward greater awareness and relational capacity. But these tools are not the solution, and treating them as such may distract from deeper work. The framework's value lies not in its comprehensiveness but in its capacity to be held lightly, used where appropriate, and transcended when something deeper is called for.

Aboriginal epistemologies offer not another set of tools but different ground to stand on—relational ontology, emplaced knowledge, cyclical regeneration, distributed wisdom, collective restoration. This ground has sustained peoples and places across deep time and offers what Western frameworks cannot: understanding of how to live in right relationship not for quarters or years but across generations and millennia.

The question is whether those of us shaped by Western ontologies can develop the humility to learn from this ground without attempting to extract, appropriate, or improve it. Can we listen without translating into our categories? Can we receive teaching without claiming to teach? Can we support without leading? Can we change ourselves and our institutions rather than developing ourselves to be more effective within unchanged systems?

These questions have no abstract answers. They require practice, failure, learning, and practice again. They require accepting that transformation may look less like developing the 25 qualities and more like spending time on Country, learning from Elders, supporting land return, changing economic structures, maintaining ceremony, listening to what the more-than-human world teaches, and participating in patterns of reciprocity and regeneration.

If there is a both/and that honors both the IDG framework and Aboriginal epistemologies, it is this: Use the framework where it serves, acknowledge its limits, respect what it cannot address, defer to Indigenous authority, support material transformation, and recognize that the ultimate work is not developing more competent individuals but restoring communities to right relationship with Country and each other.

The world doesn't need saving by heroic individuals with developed competencies. It needs humans remembering how to participate in the patterns that have always sustained life—

patterns that Indigenous peoples have never forgotten and that settlers might learn if we can develop enough humility to listen, enough courage to change, and enough wisdom to get out of the way.

This is the deepest teaching from bringing the Inner Development Goals framework into conversation with Aboriginal and Indigenous epistemologies: that inner development, if it is to serve genuine transformation, must lead us beyond the very notion of individual development toward collective restoration of right relationship with all our relations—human and more-than-human, past and future, known and unknown. Not developing ourselves to save the world, but becoming the world saving itself through remembered relationship.

This is the work. Not 25 qualities to develop but one fundamental reorientation: from separate self to relational being, from competence to obligation, from saving to restoring, from individual to collective, from progress to regeneration, from knowing to listening. This reorienttation cannot be trained or developed through the logic that created separation. It requires transformation at depths that Western frameworks can point toward but Aboriginal epistemologies embody—the transformation of remembering what we have always been: not discrete individuals whirling in space but strands in an infinite web of relationship, participants in patterns that have sustained life across deep time and will continue if we can restore ourselves to right participation.

The foam created where fresh and salt water meet—where Western frameworks and Aboriginal epistemologies engage without merging—is perhaps this: recognition that transformation is not what we do to become more capable but what happens when we remember how to participate in what has always been. Not inner development for saving the world, but collective restoration of relationship that reveals we are the world, healing itself, through practices maintained across generations by those who never forgot how to live in right relationship with all our relations.

This is what it means to save the world: not developing ourselves but restoring relationship, not individual competence but collective healing, not progress but regeneration, not doing but being, not separate but related, not saving but participating in patterns larger than any individual or framework or moment, patterns that have always known how to maintain life across deep time.

May we develop the humility to learn this. May we find the courage to change. May we grow the wisdom to listen to those who have always known. And may we participate, however imperfectly, in the world's healing of itself through restored relationship with all our relations.

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**Note on Sources**

This essay draws primarily on Aboriginal and Indigenous scholarship and frameworks, particularly from Australian Aboriginal contexts. The references reflect a commitment to centering Indigenous voices and knowledge systems while engaging with Western developmental frameworks critically. Where Western theoretical sources are included, they serve primarily to contextualize the IDG framework's intellectual heritage and provide comparative perspectives, not to validate or interpret Indigenous epistemologies.

The essay particularly privileges collaborative and Indigenous-led scholarship (such as the Bawaka Country collective's work) that demonstrates genuine two-way knowledge engagement while maintaining Indigenous authority and author-ity.