Indo-Canadian Research Partnership Roundtable

15 October 2026, New Delhi

Meeting Summary

Prepared by Co-pilot from the concept note, speaking notes, and meeting transcript. This report is intended as a substantive institutional record, to inform discussions about potential Indo-Canadian collaboration on social science research, participatory methods, Indigenous knowledge systems, climate action, and equitable research partnerships.

1. Background and Purpose

The roundtable was convened by IDRC and hosted by PRIA in New Delhi (given IDRC office closure) during a period of renewed interest in strengthening India-Canada relations and rethinking international research partnerships. Participants met – as Erin Tansey highlighted in opening remarks - against the backdrop of changing global development financing, pressure on traditional aid budgets, rapid advances in technology and artificial intelligence, and growing concern about climate change, inequality, and social exclusion. The discussion sought to identify areas where Indo-Canadian collaboration could generate distinctive value.

The IDRC concept note emphasized that India represents one of the most important sites globally for understanding social, economic, technological, and environmental transformation. The meeting also recognized Canada's commitment to reconciliation with Indigenous peoples and the relevance of this experience for broader debates on knowledge systems and equitable research. The specific focus on participatory research, Indigenous peoples, tribal communities, and minority knowledge systems also provides an entry point for discussing wider questions about the future of social science research.

2. Participants and Institutional Representation

The meeting brought together representatives from IDRC, PRIA, ICSSR, AASREC, JNU, NIHFW, ISST, Development Alternatives, UKRI, the University of Toronto India Foundation, UNESCO Chairs, and other institutions. Participants combined experience as researchers, research funders, policy leaders, civil society practitioners, public health professionals, and university administrators.

The diversity of the group was itself a strength. Participants represented social sciences, public health, higher education, climate research, gender studies, Indigenous studies, community-based research, philanthropy, and development practice. Several speakers also brought lived experience from tribal and Indigenous communities, adding a perspective that moved beyond conventional academic debate.

3. Core Objectives of the Roundtable

Five objectives emerged clearly. First, to explore opportunities for renewed Indo-Canadian research collaboration. Second, to identify priority themes where social sciences can contribute to contemporary global challenges. Third, to draw lessons from participatory and Indigenous research experiences. Fourth, to assess how institutions can support more equitable and community-centred knowledge production. Fifth, to identify practical pathways for future partnerships among research councils, universities, civil society organizations, communities, and research funders.

The meeting was deliberately exploratory rather than decision-making. Nevertheless, participants consistently focused on practical implications and future action.

4. Major Themes and Questions

A central theme was the role of social sciences in addressing climate change, technological transformation, health challenges, inequality, and governance. Participants argued that many current debates focus heavily on technology while underestimating social, political, cultural, and institutional dimensions.

Several strategic questions recurred throughout the discussion: How can knowledge systems be brought into more equal dialogue? Who defines valid knowledge? Who defines research priorities? Who benefits from research? What incentives shape research behaviour? How can participatory and Indigenous approaches move beyond rhetoric and become part of mainstream research policy and practice? How can impact be measured in ways that reflect social transformation rather than only publications and academic outputs?

5. Key Discussion: Participatory and Community-Based Research

PRIA representatives described forty-five years of experience in participatory research. Communities are viewed as co-researchers rather than subjects of research. This principle shaped extensive discussion.

Participants observed that conventional research often studies communities rather than working with them. Community-based participatory research attempts to reverse this relationship. It begins with community knowledge, incorporates community members throughout the research process, and aims to strengthen local agency.

Several examples illustrated both the promise and the challenges. Researchers described experiences where communities identified issues and solutions that external researchers would not have recognized. Others emphasized that participatory approaches are often highly transformative, producing immediate practical value, yet struggle to fit conventional funding cycles and academic incentive systems.

An important distinction emerged between participation as a method and participation as a value. Some participants argued that the deeper issue is not the technique itself but whose voices are considered legitimate and whose interpretations are valued.

6. Indigenous, Tribal, and Minority Knowledge Systems

A major strand of discussion concerned Indigenous and tribal knowledge. Speakers repeatedly emphasized that communities possess rich knowledge systems relevant to climate adaptation, agriculture, environmental stewardship, health, water management, and governance.

The discussion moved beyond simple claims about inclusion. Participants argued that knowledge systems should not merely be consulted but should shape how research questions are framed, how evidence is interpreted, and how solutions are designed.

Several contributors highlighted concerns about extraction. Communities have often served as sources of information without receiving credit, ownership, influence, or benefits. Questions of data sovereignty, community control, ownership of knowledge, and protection against inappropriate use by AI systems became particularly important.

Another important debate concerned representation. Participants welcomed efforts to increase funding for scholars from tribal communities but argued that genuine transformation requires moving beyond participation toward leadership and agenda-setting by community members themselves.

The DECODE Knowledge Project was a key reference point. The initiative examined how Indigenous and community knowledge systems interact with formal scientific and academic systems. Drawing on case studies from multiple countries, the project explored co-construction, decolonization, and transformation of knowledge. Many communities already possess practical responses to climate and sustainability challenges. Productive outcomes emerge when these forms of knowledge interact respectfully with ‘scientific’ expertise.

Participants noted that DECODE generated important lessons but also raised important unresolved questions. These include how different knowledge systems can be woven together, how validity should be assessed across traditions, how institutions can support equitable knowledge exchange, and how open science agendas can avoid reproducing knowledge hierarchies.

7. Research Methodology and Decolonization

The meeting devoted considerable attention to research methodology. A recurring argument was that dominant methodologies remain rooted in colonial histories and often privilege external expertise. Participants questioned whether research tools developed elsewhere adequately capture local realities, languages, cultures, and values.

At the same time, important cautions were raised. Debates about decolonization are often imported from other contexts and require more careful adaptation within India. Questions were raised about what constitutes Indigenous methodologies in India and whether clear distinctions between Indigenous and non-Indigenous knowledge are always possible.

Despite differing perspectives, there was broad agreement that methodologies should be more reflexive, context-sensitive, multilingual, and attentive to local concepts of knowledge. Participants emphasized listening, trust-building, long-term engagement, and ethical relationships as essential methodological principles.

8. Interdisciplinarity and Transdisciplinarity

Many participants stressed that future challenges require more than disciplinary collaboration. Climate change, health, care economies, AI, and sustainability demand engagement across social sciences, humanities, natural sciences, engineering, public health, and community knowledge systems.

The discussion progressed beyond interdisciplinarity to transdisciplinarity. Speakers argued that research should incorporate policymakers, practitioners, businesses, civil society organizations, and communities as active partners. This wider ecosystem was viewed as necessary for generating impact and moving beyond diagnostic research.

Particular interest was expressed in combining Indigenous knowledge with scientific approaches in fields such as climate forecasting, health systems, water management, and ecosystem restoration.

9. Climate Change, Health, and Community Knowledge

Climate change provided a consistent thread throughout the meeting. Participants noted that many of the earliest impacts of climate change are experienced by vulnerable and Indigenous communities.

Several speakers emphasized that local and traditional knowledge can contribute directly to adaptation strategies. Examples included climate observation systems, traditional ecological knowledge, water management practices, and health responses.

Public health participants highlighted the need for dialogue between biomedical systems and Indigenous systems of medicine. They argued that health research often asks why communities do not adopt mainstream interventions but rarely investigates community understandings of health and healing. This was identified as a major opportunity for future collaboration.

10. Gender, Care, and Social Transformation

Drawing on IDRC-supported work on women's economic empowerment and care, participants reflected on how research can shift public narratives over time. The example of care research demonstrated how participatory approaches revealed dimensions of unpaid work often ignored in mainstream policy discussions.

Participants stressed the importance of linking narrative and measurement. Research can identify overlooked realities, but policy influence frequently requires robust metrics. Future work should therefore integrate qualitative, participatory, and quantitative approaches.

There was also discussion about updating concepts of empowerment and ensuring that research reflects changing realities in women's lives rather than relying on outdated indicators.

11. Funding Systems, Incentives, and Impact Measurement

Perhaps the most directly practical discussion concerned research incentives. Participants repeatedly observed that existing funding structures reward publications, predefined outputs, and short timelines. These incentives often conflict with participatory approaches that require flexibility, relationship building, iteration, and long-term engagement.

Funders acknowledged these tensions. Ideas discussed included longer-term funding arrangements, more flexible metrics, support for exploratory collaboration, recognition of non-academic outcomes, and assessment frameworks that value social change alongside scholarly outputs.

Participants also debated accountability. Public institutions must maintain transparency and financial oversight. The challenge therefore is not eliminating accountability but designing systems that support innovation and participation while preserving public responsibility.

12. Priorities Identified for Future Collaboration

The discussion identified a substantial agenda for social science research, to be explored in future Indo-Canadian cooperation.

1: Indigenous, tribal, and minority knowledge systems, including governance, ethics, data sovereignty, and community leadership.

2: Climate adaptation and resilience, with particular attention to locally grounded and community-led solutions.

3: Participatory and community-based research methodologies, including documentation,

training, and institutionalization.

4: Health systems, especially engagement between public health, Indigenous knowledge, and community experience.

5: Gender equality, care economies, livelihoods, and social inclusion.

6: Artificial intelligence and digital transformation, including implications for Indigenous knowledge, employment, governance, and ethics.

7: Research capacity development, especially for early-career researchers, undergraduate students, and scholars from historically marginalized communities.

8: Comparative international learning, with mutual learning between Canada, India, and other regions rather than one-way transfer of models.

13. Institutional and Policy Recommendations

Participants also proposed several practical directions.

- ✓ Research councils should support longer-term and more collaborative programs.
- ✓ Universities should incorporate community-based research into teaching and training. Indigenous and tribal scholars should have greater leadership roles.
- ✓ Civil society organizations should be recognized as legitimate research partners.
- ✓ New evaluation frameworks should value community impact, learning, and institutional change alongside publications.
- ✓ Participants also highlighted the importance of creating spaces where community members, researchers, and policymakers can jointly define research priorities - essential for moving from consultation to co-production.

14. Conclusion

Although participants came from diverse disciplines and institutional contexts, a number of common messages emerged, and Indo-Canadian research partnerships can contribute to these. Research must move beyond extraction toward co-production. Communities should be recognized as knowledge holders and research leaders. Social sciences remain indispensable for addressing contemporary challenges. Climate change, health, gender equality, and technological transformation all require attention to culture, institutions, power, and lived experience.

The discussion highlighted unresolved questions concerning methodology, decolonization, knowledge validation, incentives, and impact. Rather than treating these as obstacles, participants viewed them as a shared research agenda. The strongest message from the

meeting was that collaboration should be grounded in mutual learning, long-term engagement, and respect for diverse knowledge systems.

Attendants Roundtable on Promoting Indo-Canadian Research Partnership

Institution	Individual	Status confirmation
ICSSR	Prof. Singh & Neha Yadav	Confirmed
Niti Aayog	Dr R Balasubramaniam	TBC
UGC	Dr Diksha Rajput	TBC
NIHFW	Binod Kumar Patro	Confirmed
IIPH	Jyoti Sharma	Confirmed
JNU	Dr Sonajharia Minz	Confirmed
ISST	Jahnvi Andharia	Confirmed
UNNATI	Dr Binoy	Confirmed
Development Alternatives	Shrashant Patara	Confirmed
UNESCO	tbc	Invited
UKRI	Basheera Shaik	Confirmed
UofT Foundation	Gauravi Lobo	Invited
Canada High Commission	Jasvinder Kaur	Confirmed
IDRC	Erin Tansey	Confirmed
IDRC	Arjan de Haan	
PRIA	Anshuman Karol	Confirmed
PRIA	Rabi Raj	