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INDIGENOUS PATHWAYS TO SOCIAL JUSTICE, RECONCILIATION, HEALING AND WELL-BEING WITH ALL OUR RELATIONS

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Abstract. Indigenous Peoples, despite being crucial stewards of biodiversity, continue to face deep social injustices and marginalization. They endure ongoing criminalization in the name of conservation and sustainable development, while their knowledge systems and rights are consistently undermined and neglected by dominant policies and narratives. In this paper, we argue that understanding social injustice requires acknowledging the enduring legacy of colonization, we introduce the Ărramăt Project and propose the Maslow's hierarchy as a methodological framework aimed at decolonizing narratives and research, to achieve social justice, healing, and reconciliation among all our relations and with Mother Earth.

Keywords. Indigenous Peoples, decolonization, social justice, healing, reconciliation, Maslow's hierarchy of needs

1. Positionality Statement

We would like to acknowledge the diverse Indigenous lands, territories and cultures that have guided us throughout the drafting of this paper which is authored by an interdisciplinary team of six researchers, four of whom self-identify as Indigenous from the Ëyuujk, Kel Tamasheq, Zapoteca and Kurukh Peoples with long-standing experience working with Indigenous Peoples across research, policy, and

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practice. The authorship brings together Indigenous lived experience, allied non-Indigenous perspectives, and professional expertise developed through academic, institutional, and Indigenous Place-based engagement.

This work is mainly from and in the Ărramăt Project, and its expanding network of Indigenous Peoples, which informs both the substance and relational approach of the research. Through this network, the paper reflects knowledge co-produced across diverse Indigenous contexts and grounded in ongoing dialogue, trust, and collaboration.

The narrative intentionally centers Indigenous voices while engaging collective analysis, alternating between shared insights and the perspectives of Indigenous authors to highlight specific experiences and priorities. The authors acknowledge the centrality of Mother Earth for knowledge production and the power dynamics inherent in research, and commit to reflexivity, relational accountability, and respect for Indigenous knowledge systems.

2. Introduction

The concepts of social justice, healing, and reconciliation are frequently invoked in literature, particularly in regions with histories of colonialism, conflict, and war. These concepts offer a pathway to address historical injustices and create more equitable societies. Acknowledging past events is crucial in this process, even when confronting disturbing, horrifying, or painful truths. However, in our pursuit of truth and reconciliation, we must grapple with complex questions: How far back should we delve into history to reconstruct facts and memories? What are the most effective strategies for achieving reconciliation? How can we balance various factors to foster a more just society? Successful reconciliation and the establishment of a just society are far-reaching goals and can lead to several outcomes: (i) improved social cohesion and trust among different groups; (ii) economic growth and stability through increased cooperation; (iii) enhanced mental health and well-being for affected populations; (iv) stronger democratic institutions and a more robust rule of law; (v) reduced likelihood of future conflicts; and (vi) preservation of cultural heritage and promotion of diversity.

This literature review emerges in the context of the Ărramăt Project, a global research effort that seeks to strengthen health and well-being through Indigenous-led conservation and sustainable relationships with biodiversity. The project aims to strengthen Indigenous voices and capacities to document their knowledge on the importance of the environment and biodiversity to the health and well-being of their communities and to support Indigenous Peoples' voices, needs, and recommendations at local, regional, national, and global levels on issues linked to

well-being, sustainability, and biodiversity. This project is an umbrella for 140 place-based Indigenous research projects around the world covering the seven socio-cultural regions of Indigenous Peoples synthesized into ten thematic global transformation pathways (Ărramăt Project, n.d) (Figure 1).

The Ărramăt Project is holistic and interdisciplinary, and each pathway is a call for action through Indigenous-led research that informs policy processes and transforms societal and institutional dynamics to achieve social justice and well-being for all; these include the recognition of Indigenous Peoples' contributions to different challenges, the role and value of their knowledge systems, their role and recognition of their agency and position as rights holders, and the role of their lands and territories. In the end, all the pathways are linked, and pathway 4 in particular, looks at how the different pathways contribute to social justice while recognizing a gender-based perspective that affects Indigenous Peoples in different ways. The emerging vision for pathway 4 is "to achieve transformation by recognizing the past and present to restore and create a good life and justice for all in Mother Earth" (Ărramăt Project, 2023).

This research paper lays the theoretical foundation for understanding social justice, reconciliation, and healing from the perspectives of Indigenous Peoples. The necessity to explore these concepts emerged from discussions among the Ărramăt Project implementers. We present a theoretical framework and methodological proposal for integrating these concepts into research projects and policy processes. Drawing on Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs, our approach provides a culturally relevant and holistic lens that emphasizes the collective well-being of Indigenous communities, their connection to the land, and the importance of their spiritual and cultural identities. This adapted model aims to guide projects that address the complex challenges Indigenous Peoples face in their pursuit of justice, healing, and reconciliation.

3. Methodology

This paper is grounded in a comprehensive literature review and presents a methodological framework designed to guide projects, such as the Ărramăt Project, in addressing social justice, reconciliation, and healing in the context of Indigenous Peoples. Additionally, it aims to inform and influence related policy processes.

The authorship of this paper reflects a diverse interdisciplinary team with extensive experience in Indigenous Peoples' issues. The team consists of six authors, four of whom self-identify as Indigenous. All authors have significant experience collaborating with Indigenous Peoples over many years. The paper presents a blend of voices, including direct Indigenous perspectives from the five Indigenous authors, allied

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Figure 1: Ten pathways of the Ărramăt Project.

FIGURE 1. Ten Pathways of the Ărramăt Project. Source: Ărramăt, n.d

non-Indigenous perspectives, and expert viewpoints from the authors' roles in academia, research institutions, and practical fieldwork. This multifaceted approach allows for a rich, nuanced exploration of the topics at hand. The narrative alternates between collective insights and highlights of the Indigenous authors' voices to emphasize particular points or experiences.

By combining academic rigor with lived experiences and practical insights, the paper aims to provide a comprehensive and authentic examination of social justice, reconciliation, and healing in Indigenous contexts while also offering actionable methodological guidance for future projects and policy initiatives.

4. Defining Indigenous Peoples

This paper explores social justice, healing, and reconciliation concerning colonization's impact on Indigenous Peoples, which has led

to their ongoing marginalization and discrimination. Indigenous Peoples inhabited the land prior to colonization, complicating their struggles for recognition and rights. For example, Indigenous groups in India have faced both external and internal colonization, resulting in the loss of ancestral territories (Jenkins, 2003; Karlsson, 2001; Skaria, 1997). Despite claims of independence, colonial legacies continue Indigenous Peoples have long advocated for self-determination, supported by frameworks like the International Labour Organization's Convention 169 (ILO, 1989, ILO 2019) and the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP; United Nations General Assembly, 2007), which outlines essential standards for Indigenous rights and emphasizes their right to self-identify and preserve cultural identity.

Global definitions of Indigenous Peoples vary, and state-imposed categories can be discriminatory. This paper intentionally avoids a single definition of Indigenous Peoples to honor their right to self-determination and autonomy in self-identification. A common definition used to characterize Indigenous Peoples comes from the United Nations (2004):

> Indigenous Peoples, communities, and nations are those which, having a historical continuity with pre-invasion and pre-colonial societies, developed in a given territory and consider themselves distinct from other sectors of the societies now prevailing on those territories, or parts of them. They form, at present, non-dominant sectors of society and are determined to preserve, develop, and transmit to future generations their ancestral territories and their ethnic identity as the basis of their continued existence as peoples, following their cultural patterns, social institutions, and legal system. (p. 2)

State-defined categories for Indigenous Peoples can be discriminatory, often excluding certain groups. For example, in Canada, Indigenous women who marry non-Indigenous men may lose their Indigenous status (Native Women's Association of Canada, n.d., Parliament of Canada, n.d). In the United States, recognition of Indigenous status typically relies on criteria such as residency on a reservation or affiliation with a federally recognized group; those who do not meet these criteria may be classified as urban Indigenous Peoples.

Globally, legal frameworks vary in their definitions of Indigenous Peoples. In India, for example, the constitution identifies certain marginalized groups as scheduled tribes (Karlsson, 2001). Despite these definitions, Indigenous Peoples retain the right to self-identify, as affirmed by UNDRIP. This paper uses the term "Indigenous Peoples"

to recognize that many prefer identifiers tied to their nations, such as Ëyuujk, Kel Tamasheq (Tuareg), or Binizaa.

Globally, the existing data estimate that there are 476 million Indigenous Peoples in over 90 countries, occupying less than 28% of the Earth's land surface (Sobrevila, 2008). They speak around 4,000 languages and protect 80% of the world's remaining biodiversity, despite comprising less than 6% of the global population. Indigenous Peoples have adapted to a wide range of environments and developed sustainable systems for food, water, energy, and knowledge. However, their contributions are often undermined by policies supporting monocropping and intensive agriculture, resulting in excessive pesticide use that harms biodiversity and Indigenous communities, particularly affecting Mayan bees and groundwater in Mexico, for example (Vides-Borrell et al., 2019).

Indigenous Peoples also face threats from educational systems that erode their languages and cultures, healthcare services that disregard cultural diversity, and land grabs presented as green initiatives. The so-called just transition frequently infringes on their lands, waters, and territories, disrupting essential ecosystems (Indigenous Peoples' delegates at COP28, 2023). The legacy of colonization has created entrenched structural issues that violate human rights and limit self-determination, forcing many Indigenous Peoples to navigate significant challenges in their pursuit of survival and development.

5. Unboxing social justice, reconciliation and healing

Social justice and reconciliation are often discussed in the context of civil wars or conflicts (Zehr, 2008), while healing typically relates to overcoming violence and trauma, emphasizing individual closure after traumatic experiences (Parent, 2011). Recently, there has been a global movement to promote reconciliation and healing in collaboration with Indigenous Peoples, as these processes are deeply connected to the legacies of colonization that have profoundly disrupted Indigenous communities worldwide.

In this section, we explore the meanings of social justice, reconciliation, and healing for Indigenous Peoples with the aim of deconstructing prevailing narratives. Understanding the legacy of colonization and the ongoing challenges faced by Indigenous Peoples —challenges rooted in this history—necessitates examining these concepts from Indigenous perspectives. The next three sections delve into the key definitions and implications of social justice, reconciliation, and healing in Indigenous contexts, providing specific definitions for each concept.

5.1. **Decolonizing narratives.**

Colonization is often framed by settlers through two main narratives (McGuire & Denis, 2019). The first

is the "benevolent peacemaker" myth, which portrays colonization as an innocent act beneficial to Indigenous Peoples, suggesting that settlers brought development and a "better" life to "savages" (Killsback, 2013). This justification allows states to claim they are "saving," "modernizing," or "developing" Indigenous Peoples while denying their agency and rights. Conversely, when the brutal history of colonization and forced assimilation is acknowledged, it is frequently represented through the lens of non-Indigenous scholars, who often lack the ability to fully articulate the profound impacts of colonization on Indigenous Peoples due to their Western methodologies (Killsback, 2013). Their narratives often overlook the cultural and epistemological differences involved.

Indigenous-led movements and decolonial scholars (e.g., Aguilar Sanchez, 2020; Escobar, 2011; Galeano, 2004; Martínez-Luna, 2010; Reyes Gómez, 2017) highlight that Indigenous Peoples have consistently challenged dominant narratives that depict them as passive victims or "noble savages," which diminishes their agency and resistance efforts (Scott, 1985). In modern society, Indigenous Peoples continue to negotiate their rights, redefine their identities, and establish new institutions (Cunningham, 2011).

Decolonizing these narratives involves dismantling the dominant storytelling about Indigenous histories and amplifying Indigenous voices in shaping their past, present, and future. Indigenous Peoples are not relics; they are vibrant nations that have resisted and survived colonization while continuing to oppose the oppressive structures of modern states (Aguilar Sanchez, 2020). As Reyes Gómez (2017) states, no one is better positioned to tell "our" stories than we, Indigenous Peoples, ourselves, for we possess the cultural nuances and complexities necessary for authentic representation.

The Ărramăt Project exemplifies this approach by being led by Indigenous researchers who collaborate with Indigenous scholars, communities, and leaders, giving voice to their own histories, challenges, and aspirations. Five of the authors of this paper identify as Indigenous scholars entrenched in the legacy of oppression and committed to creating a fairer and more just world. The project contributes significantly to decolonizing dominant narratives by centring Indigenous perspectives throughout the process (Von Braun & Alford, 2025).

5.2. **The need for healing, reconciliation, and social justice for Indigenous Peoples.** Achieving social justice for Indigenous Peoples is both a process and an outcome. Colonization disrupted our cultures, eroded traditional knowledge, and led to forced displacement, fundamentally altering our ways of life. It also imposed deep-rooted harm,

manifesting in widespread illness, trauma, and dysfunction—such as alcoholism—while contributing to the loss of language and physical, sexual, mental, and spiritual abuses. Even today, Indigenous Peoples live under conditions shaped by the painful legacy of colonization, which continues to perpetuate institutionalized discrimination, marginalization, and vulnerabilities.

For instance, poverty disproportionately affects Indigenous Peoples, who comprise only 6% of the global population yet account for 19% of those living in extreme poverty (World Bank, 2024). They are 2.7 times more likely to experience poverty than their non-Indigenous counterparts (Pero et al., 2023). Food insecurity, an urgent concern, is further exacerbated by climate change, COVID-19, conflict, land grabbing (Martínez-Cruz, 2023), and the historical and institutional discrimination rooted in colonization (Kuhnlein & Chotiboriboon, 2022). In Canada, Indigenous households are two to six times more likely to face food insecurity than non-Indigenous households (Tarasuk & Mitchell, 2020), with food insecurity rates at 28.2% among those living on reserves compared to 12.7% in the general Canadian population (Dietitians of Canada, 2016). In Ecuador, Indigenous children are twice as likely to suffer from stunting as their non-Indigenous peers (Pero et al., 2023). The policies contributing to these disparities have colonial roots, neglecting or undermining Indigenous food and knowledge systems (Martínez-Cruz, 2022) and leading to forced displacement, from relocations to reservations (Maldonado et al., 2014) and ongoing evictions in the name of biodiversity conservation (Brockington & Igoe, 2006). Additionally, assimilation processes through education (Bellier & Hays, 2017) and violations of the right to self-determination (Cunningham, 2011) have compounded and continue to exacerbate these challenges.

Social justice, understood as both process and outcome, necessitates the deconstruction of dominant narratives, requires truth telling from those who have been oppressed, particularly Indigenous Peoples, demands that settlers, dominant, and other groups in society to be willing to listen to these truths, and that all parties commit to taking actionable steps toward reconciliation, acknowledging the deep-seated differences that must be recognized in the pursuit of collective healing (Figure 2). In the following sections, we elaborate further on what is entailed by truth telling.

Figure 2. Social Justice, reconciliation, and healing, the interconnected concepts.

FIGURE 2. Social justice, reconciliation and healing, the interconnected concepts (adapted from Ărramăt Project, 2023)

5.3. **Social justice.** The concept of social justice has been explored across various disciplines, including social psychology, health, and economics (Buettner-Schmidt & Lobo, 2012). For this paper, we adopt Buettner-Schmidt & Lobo (2012)'s (pp 955) definition, which synthesizes multiple perspectives: social justice is "full participation in society and the balancing of benefits and burdens by all citizens, resulting in equitable living and just ordering of society".

While this definition highlights essential elements from a comprehensive literature review, the authors stress the need to recognize that different organizations may interpret social justice differently. The attributes they identify include the following: fairness; equity in the distribution of power, resources, and processes that affect the social determinants of health; just institutions, systems, structures, policies, and processes; equity in human development, rights, and sustainability; and sufficiency of well-being.

However, it is vital to critically assess who defines fairness, distributes power, and determines just institutions. Questions about how equity is established in development frameworks and how sufficiency in well-being is measured highlight the inherently relative nature of these attributes. Traditionally, social justice assumes a universal understanding of values (Walster & Walster, 1975), but we acknowledge and focus on the power asymmetries and ongoing impacts of colonization and modern state structures on Indigenous Peoples' conditions and access to social justice.

In a context shaped by colonization, institutionalized racism, discrimination, and marginalization that affect the lives of Indigenous Peoples today, what does social justice truly mean? To explore that question, we draw on Fraser's (2010) framework of scales of justice, which outlines three key dimensions. Jackson (2018) adapted this framework

to analyze Indigenous Peoples' involvement in water security, politics, and access, while Camacho-Villa et al. (2021) and Martínez-Cruz et al. (2024) further applied these dimensions to examine Indigenous Peoples' engagement in climate change and water security agendas. These three dimensions of justice are as follows:

(1) Distributional Justice/Redistribution of Power: This dimension focuses on the redistribution of power, resources, and opportunities, ensuring equitable access and the redress of historical injustices.

(2) Political Representation and Participation: This aspect emphasizes the need for Indigenous Peoples to have meaningful political representation and active participation in decision-making processes that affect their lands, waters, and lives.

(3) Cultural Recognition and Respect: This involves the recognition of Indigenous Peoples' cultures, traditions, knowledge systems, and right to self-determination, ensuring that their identities and ways of life are respected and protected.

5.3.1. *Distributional Justice/Redistribution of Power.* Redistribution of power, or distributional justice, aims to address power asymmetries and create conditions for all individuals to participate in society and access fundamental rights. For Indigenous Peoples, this means ensuring access to those rights equal to the rest of humanity (Fraser, 2010; Jackson, 2018). In many so-called First World countries, Indigenous Peoples are treated as second-class citizens at best, often lacking access to clean and safe water (Peltier, 2019). Additionally, chemicals banned in Europe are still used in Indigenous territories, exposing children in those areas to six times more toxins than their non-Indigenous counterparts (Diver, 2023; Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, 2021). Camacho-Villa et al. (2021) emphasizes the injustice in the distribution of climate change costs and benefits, pointing out that the marginalization of Indigenous Peoples is rooted in colonization and globalization (Doolittle, 2010) and how this legacy still perpetuates injustice in the present.

Power disparities are evident when Indigenous youth are denied access to a university education that honors their language or worldview (Córdova-Hernández, 2011), when school meal programs ignore the cultural significance of food for Indigenous children (Pero et al., 2023), and when an Indigenous girl lacks access to clean water (United Nations General Assembly, 2023). For example, a woman in Kenya may walk as many as five hours simply to fetch water (Balanga, 2022), and Indigenous Peoples in Bangladesh may be displaced for green energy projects or development initiatives (Nasreen, 2017). As Escobar (2011) and Freire (1996) have argued, the creation of the notion of a

"Third World" has perpetuated neocolonialism and thus continues to oppress Indigenous Peoples.

Understanding the current situation of Indigenous Peoples requires acknowledgment of historical contexts. Modern state borders have displaced them from ancestral lands, and policies such as residential schools and inadequate health services have disrupted their livelihoods and health, physically, spiritually, and culturally (Kim, 2019; Rivera et al., 2017; Tait, 2003; Wallet Med Aboubakrine, 2024). This has resulted in the erosion of traditional knowledge and skills.

According to Martínez-Cruz et al. (2024), addressing the structural and historical roots of inequality is vital for redistributing power. While colonization is a significant cause, modern state policies promoting assimilation and marginalization further entrench these disparities. Power imbalances, both structurally and in daily practice, silence Indigenous voices and limit their participation in decision making.

Against this background, we support Stanisevski's (2009) call for transformative justice rather than merely restorative justice . He argues that restoring a pre-colonial state of harmony is unattainable given that colonization has marginalized Indigenous Peoples. Instead, social justice must be transformative, demanding accountability and active engagement from all. While the original perpetrators of colonial injustices may no longer be alive, transformative justice invites Indigenous Peoples and settlers alike to heal together and take concrete steps toward redistributing power. By transforming power structures and amplifying Indigenous voices and rights, we can work toward genuine social justice.

5.3.2. *On political representation: Indigenous Peoples are right holders.* Indigenous Peoples are rights holders and must be recognized as active participants with the right to self-determination and political participation, particularly in matters that affect their lives, water, and territories. This recognition should be grounded in established frameworks, including UNDRIP, the ILO's Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention, and the right to free, prior, and informed consent, along with relevant national policies that states and organizations are obligated to respect.

Achieving social justice for Indigenous Peoples, which is essential for reconciliation, requires full acknowledgment and adherence to these frameworks. However, even though some states formally recognize Indigenous rights, violations frequently occur in practice. Policies related to food, education, health, infrastructure, self-determination, and resource extraction often proceed without Indigenous consent or even

participation, disregarding their basic rights. Despite theoretical recognition in countries like Mali (Wallet Med Aboubakrine, 2024), enforcement remains lacking. In Niger, for example, the Biafran people's call for a referendum on self-determination has been ignored by the UN due to the political interests of other member states (Nduba et al., 2020). The failure to uphold Indigenous rights under frameworks like UNDRIP is often rooted in political and economic convenience, as recognizing Indigenous Peoples as rights holders could challenge existing power structures or economic interests (Cunningham, 2011; Nduba et al., 2020).

While respecting Indigenous Peoples' rights is crucial, it is also essential to ensure that these rights do not conflict with other human rights under international law. For instance, cultural practices such as female genital mutilation among the Maasai cannot be justified if they violate the rights of Indigenous women and girls (Anaya, 2004). Along the same lines, when speaking about representation, it is essential to note that Indigenous Peoples are not a homogenous group. Understanding social injustice and inequity requires an intersectional lens that appreciates the differences between communities. Indigenous women face dual marginalization as both women and Indigenous Peoples. In Guatemala, for instance, the national literacy rate for men is 88%, compared to 77% for women. However, when comparing literacy gap between Indigenous men and Indigenous women is more than twice the national average, and this gap widens for Indigenous women in rural areas (Granados Barnéond & Solano Garrido, 2020).

Additionally, gender in Indigenous communities should not be viewed through Western categorizations; each identity reflects unique cultural roles and ancestral understandings. Gómez-Regalado (2024) emphasizes the importance of recognizing ancestral genders that are rooted in community-specific roles.

To achieve social justice, interventions must adhere to internationally recognized frameworks while respecting the vast diversity of Indigenous Peoples. In areas where they have not been officially recognized as having rights, this must be prioritized. Recognition is not merely a bureaucratic task; it is foundational for genuine engagement, development, and justice. Only through this recognition can we pave the way for a future where Indigenous Peoples' rights are actively upheld and respected.

5.3.3. *Recognizing and respecting our cultures, traditions, and ways of living.* Indigenous Peoples share a profound and intrinsic relationship with nature that is woven deeply into their identities. Their ties to the land are not merely physical; they encompass cultural, spiritual, and cosmological elements. This powerful bond is why Indigenous Peoples are often regarded as the "champions of adaptation." They have thrived

in diverse and extreme environments—from the frigid Arctic to the arid Sahel—by cultivating extensive knowledge of their territories. This adaptation is grounded in a worldview, or cosmovision, that defines how they interact with and care for their surroundings, following the natural cycles of their environments and preserving the life within them (Martínez-Cruz et al., 2024).

Some scholars refer to this intimate relationship as bioculturality (Camacho-Villa et al., 2020), highlighting the connectedness of cultural and biological diversity. Unfortunately, bioculturality is often overlooked in policy interventions, scientific research, and development programs. When Indigenous Peoples are displaced from their ancestral lands, their biocultural rights are violated, disrupting their ability to maintain the traditions, rituals, and entire cosmologies that are essential to their livelihoods and adaptive capacities (Schlosberg & Caruthers, 2010; Tsosie, 2007). This cultural harm diminishes their worldviews (Eriksen, 2021) and underscores the need for genuine social justice that respects and actively restores these biocultural dimensions. Protecting these rights is crucial for current and future generations to continue their ways of life.

However, how can we speak of social justice when over 350 environmental activists were murdered in 2021 alone, a third of whom were Indigenous Peoples defending their territories (Global Witness, 2021; Hines, 2022)? How can we pursue social justice while residential schools in Russia and China continue to forcibly remove Indigenous children from their families, resulting in cultural assimilation and erasure (Indigenous Person 2, 2023; Xia, 2023)? Furthermore, how can social justice be realized when a language dies every two weeks (UNESCO, 2024)? The extinction of these languages represents not just a linguistic loss but also reflects the ongoing marginalization, criminalization, and violence faced by their speakers, who are predominantly Indigenous Peoples (Martínez-Cruz et al., 2024).

True social justice cannot be achieved without addressing these systemic inequities, and that necessitates the recognition and protection of the rights, territories, cultures, and lives of Indigenous Peoples, ensuring that their voices are heard and that their ways of life preserved for future generations.

6. Reconciliation

Reconciliation generally refers to the restoration of relationships, such as rebuilding friendships or reaching agreements with adversaries (Chicuecue, 1997). The concept has gained prominence in discussions surrounding wars, armed conflicts, and post-colonial societies. Nations with colonial histories—like Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and the United States—have used reconciliation to address the historical and

ongoing injustices faced by Indigenous Peoples. However, definitions of reconciliation often vary widely, influenced by individual beliefs and values (Chicuecue, 1997; Datta, 2020; Kim, 2019). Scholars use the term to explore societal responsibility and accountability toward Indigenous Peoples and other marginalized groups such as immigrants, refugees, and social minorities (Datta, 2020; Kim, 2019). In this paper, we adopt Indigenous scholar Leanne Betasamosake Simpson's (2011) definition, which frames reconciliation as "a process of regeneration that will take many years to accomplish" (p. 22). Simpson emphasizes that genuine reconciliation requires more than symbolic gestures; it demands ongoing solidarity, responsibility, truth-telling, and accountability. This perspective positions reconciliation as a collective obligation, where both Indigenous and non-Indigenous individuals must engage in responsible actions to rebuild trust and equity.

Simpson (2011) further urges a critical examination of reconciliation's implications for Indigenous Peoples, cautioning that it can become a tool of neocolonialism when framed as a means for settlers and governments to "move on" from their colonial past without addressing the lasting struggles of Indigenous Peoples. This kind of approach risks silencing Indigenous Peoples' resistance to ongoing colonial structures and minimizes their demands for justice and autonomy.

Simpson's critique is exemplified by the notion of an "just transition" in the context of climate change that centres narratives of social justice and transformation at the expense of Indigenous Peoples who are often portrayed as the beneficiaries of such approaches (Indigenous delegates at COP28, 2023). A study by Owen et al. (2022) indicates that transitioning to renewable energy will depend on 30 key minerals, with over 5,097 global mining projects, with more than half located on Indigenous and peasant lands and thus threatening their livelihoods and environments. While a just transition is intended to promote environmental sustainability, it can unintentionally replicate colonial patterns by disproportionately burdening Indigenous communities.

Simpson's analysis highlights the risk of framing reconciliation as a broad framework that can easily overlook Indigenous struggles. If reconciliation is presented only as a pathway to unity and healing without addressing persisting power dynamics and systemic inequalities, it can criminalize Indigenous resistance. Reconciliation should not imply that conflicts can be easily resolved or that Indigenous Peoples must simply forgive and forget. Instead, it must confront the enduring colonial legacies shaping Indigenous experiences and ensure that Indigenous voices lead the process.

Ultimately, reconciliation is a long-term, transformative journey that requires genuine accountability and respect for Indigenous sovereignty. It should be framed through the perspectives of affected

populations, who may advocate for unexpected solutions. For example, in postwar Mozambique, reconciliation was viewed as best achieved through purification rituals using traditional medicine (Chicuecue, 2017).

6.1. **Responsibilities and accountability.** Numerous studies reveal that many settlers in colonial societies remain unaware of the lasting impacts of colonialism on Indigenous Peoples, particularly regarding the legacy of Indian residential schools and the intergenerational trauma that continues to affect communities today. This ongoing legacy significantly contributes to social issues among Indigenous Peoples (Datta, 2020; Marom, 2016; Simpson, 2011). The disruption of connections to culture, family, land, parenting, and intergenerational relationships has deeply scarred many Indigenous communities. This limited understanding among settlers perpetuates misconceptions about Indigenous history and ongoing struggles, as well as the broader transnational responsibility for reconciliation (Datta, 2019; Marom, 2016; Simpson, 2011; Yu, 2020).

At the heart of any reconciliation process lie the principles of responsibility and accountability. For genuine reconciliation and social justice to occur, key questions must be addressed (adapted from Datta, 2020, and Kim, 2019):

(1) What are the issues we must acknowledge or take responsibility for? This requires an honest examination of colonization's history, including systemic violence, forced assimilation, land dispossession, and cultural erasure that have harmed Indigenous Peoples. Settler societies must recognize the intergenerational trauma that persists in Indigenous communities as a direct result of these colonial practices. Acknowledgment also encompasses the present, as many historical processes are root causes of the current challenges faced by Indigenous Peoples. Most important is the recognition that these issues will or could affect future generations.

(2) What obligations do we have to those we seek to hold accountable? Responsibility extends beyond mere acknowledgment; it requires active steps to repair the harm caused. This could include reparations, policy reforms, ensuring Indigenous Peoples' rights to land and resources, and fostering their leadership in decision-making processes. Acknowledging responsibility should be seen as an evolving process that adapts to the aspirations and desired futures of Indigenous Peoples.

(3) What actions should be implemented at the policy level to promote social justice and prevent the recurrence of these injustices?

Reconciliation must translate into concrete policy changes, such as recognizing and implementing Indigenous laws and governance systems, integrating Indigenous perspectives into education and national narratives, and protecting Indigenous languages and cultures. Ensuring equitable access to resources like clean water, healthcare, and education is also vital. Structural reforms should aim not only to remedy past injustices but dismantle ongoing systems of inequality that continue to marginalize Indigenous Peoples. Addressing these questions is critical for building a just society in which Indigenous Peoples' rights are respected and their histories, knowledge, and contributions are honored. True reconciliation requires more than symbolic gestures; it demands sustained, systemic change guided by responsibility and accountability at every level of society.

6.2. **Towards reconciliation and social justice.** Reconciliation can be approached in many ways, with two key goals commonly emphasized: achieving social justice and fostering collective healing. Expanding upon the earlier discussion of reconciliation and responsibility, the following key elements should be considered:

a) *Recognition of historical accountability.*

Acknowledging collective memory from a decolonial perspective is crucial.This means amplifying the voices and experiences of those affected by colonial violence and oppression. Acknowledgment can take many forms, such as naming perpetrators, organizing public hearings, and issuing formal statements. The goal is not to debate factual accuracy but to recognize lived experiences and trauma. Truth and reconciliation commissions in Canada, New Zealand, and Australia have provided platforms for survivors to share their stories, yet individual interpretations of these processes can vary, with some survivors having positive memories for their well-being and others finding the experience more traumatic (Kim, 2019).

b) *The collective and individual nature of reconciliation.*

A significant challenge in reconciliation is addressing both the collective and individual experiences of oppression. While groups like Indigenous Peoples have faced systemic and collective oppression, individuals within these communities may have encountered this trauma in diverse and deeply personal ways. Therefore, reconciliation must strike a balance between acknowledging these collective histories and honouring individual narratives that may differ. It is crucial to respect these variations to avoid revictimization and further harm. Despite the differences in experiences and perspectives, the primary goal of reconciliation should focus on healing and establishing common ground between Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities, while carefully

navigating the expectations of Indigenous Peoples and being willing to engage in reparations and transformative change (Kim, 2019).

c) *Raising societal awareness and engaging civil society and other actors.*

Achieving social justice for Indigenous Peoples requires raising societal awareness about the historical and ongoing trauma they have endured, which is essential for combating impunity. While accountability for past crimes may not always be feasible, society must recognize the enduring harm caused. McGuire and Denis (2019) illustrate varied levels of engagement among non-Indigenous participants in Canada's reconciliation process, with some questioning their roles while others actively supported Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Effective reconciliation must engage victims, institutions, governments, the broader civil society, and the global community. By fostering awareness at local, national, and international levels, we can preserve the collective memory of past injustices and ensure that everyone contributes to the process of accountability. This foundational work is crucial for establishing a sustainable framework for social justice in the future, particularly for new generations, serving as a guide and beacon in their lives.

d) The role of reparations in reconciliation: Reparations can take many forms, including monetary compensation, land restitution, public apologies, truth commissions, and commemorations. In some cases, reparations may lead to significant political or legislative changes that support Indigenous Peoples' rights. However, determining the scope of reparations is often a complex process, with different levels of willingness from those in power to make reparative gestures. While reparations may never fully compensate for the harm caused, they are crucial for healing and advancing reconciliation. The process can be viewed as part of transformative justice, in which the goal is not merely to repair past damage but to create conditions for ongoing justice and fairness.

e) Addressing diverse expectations in reparations and recognize limits and challenges of reparations: Expectations surrounding reparations vary not only between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Peoples but also among Indigenous communities themselves. These differences must be handled with great care to avoid further victimization or exacerbation of existing trauma. Sensitive and inclusive dialogue is essential to ensure that the reconciliation process is healing and transformative for all involved, while understanding that there might be some limits on what can be achieved.

Reconciliation requires a long-term commitment to healing, social justice, and transformative change. It involves recognizing historical wrongs, raising public awareness, engaging civil society, and navigating

diverse experiences of harm, while striving for meaningful reparations and structural reforms.

6.3. **Healing.** Healing is a concept closely tied to social justice and reconciliation, but what exactly is its connection to these processes? According to Ansloos (2014), for Indigenous Peoples, healing extends beyond the individual. It encompasses a broader spectrum, including the well-being of land, water, spiritual realms, cosmologies, and cultural elements, dimensions that are often overlooked in mainstream approaches to healing. If the ultimate goal of reconciliation and social justice is to foster healing for Indigenous Peoples, then understanding and defining their specific needs must be the starting point.

In earlier discussions on social justice and reconciliation, we identified the importance of prioritizing actions to achieve meaningful outcomes. In the process of transforming justice and advancing reconciliation, Indigenous voices and needs must be placed at the center. However, these needs should be addressed in alignment with Indigenous values, respecting their right to self-determination and agency. When approached correctly, Indigenous empowerment can lead to a healing process not only for Indigenous communities but also for society as a whole, promoting a more reconciled and just world.

The literature review by Yu et al. (2020) examines how healing has been discussed in the Canadian context and reports that Indigenous knowledge, wisdom, and worldviews are frequently absent in these studies. This omission highlights a critical issue: healing cannot be effectively framed, let alone undertaken, if its core dimensions as shaped by Indigenous cultures are misunderstood or ignored. Healing from an Indigenous Peoples' perspective requires engaging with their cosmovisions, languages, knowledge systems, spirituality, and deep connections to land.

To truly commit to healing, social justice, and reconciliation, these Indigenous perspectives must be integral to any approach. Otherwise, attempts to foster healing risk perpetuating the same exclusionary frameworks that initially caused harm. A holistic approach, rooted in Indigenous wisdom and grounded in respect for their cultural and spiritual connections, offers the most genuine pathway toward a reconciled, just, and healed society.

7. A proposal to unpack social justice, healing, and reconciliation in the Ărramăt Project: Maslow's hierarchy of needs

In previous sections, we examine the connections between social justice, healing, and reconciliation. The authors debated whether to approach these concepts separately, view them as complementary, or

understand them as connected in practical applications. Through an extensive literature review, we identified Maslow's hierarchy of needs as one of the most frequently cited frameworks for addressing trauma and recovery (Poston, 2009). We have adapted this model to fit the context of Indigenous Peoples (Figure 3).

While we acknowledge the limitations of Maslow's hierarchy—particularly its linear, individualistic focus, which may not resonate with the collective and relational worldviews of many Indigenous cultures—we believe that it serves as a valuable starting point for understanding certain human needs. It can illuminate the desired or perceived needs of Indigenous Peoples in the contexts of healing, reconciliation, and social justice. In the following section, we address these critiques and propose an adaptation of the model that better aligns with the goals of projects like Ărramăt, which seek to support social justice, healing, and reconciliation for Indigenous Peoples.

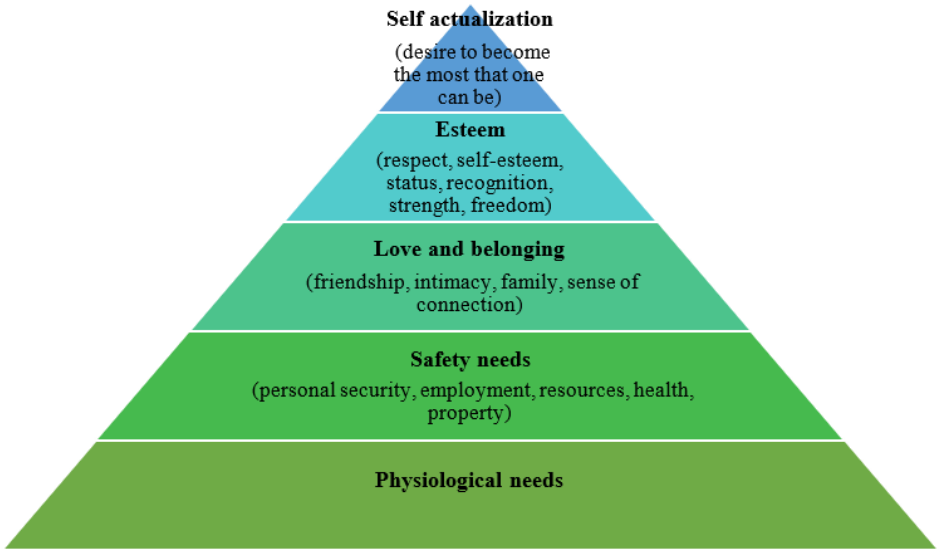

FIGURE 3. Maslow's hierarchy of needs to address healing after a traumatic experience. Adapted from "A Theory of Human Motivation", by A. H. Maslow, 1943, Psychological Review, 50(4), 370–396. https://doi.org/10.1037/h0054346.

While Maslow's hierarchy of needs has been widely used, few studies have explored its relevance to collective experiences and group needs, particularly in conflict zones or war-torn regions like Gaza (Alah, 2024). Alah's research emphasizes that although the model effectively

outlines individual needs, structural circumstances often impede self-actualization, regardless of an individual's desires and efforts. This presents a significant challenge for Indigenous Peoples, the fulfillment of whose needs can be hindered by external factors. For instance, while the hierarchy of needs can help outline the conditions Indigenous Peoples aim to change in pursuit of social justice, healing, and reconciliation, opposing parties may disagree on these priorities. Examples of this include the Land Back movements in the United States (Kaur, 2020; Pieratos et al., 2021) that have emerged as a counter-narrative to reassert the visibility of Indigenous Peoples' issues in that country, reclaiming self-determination and not limiting other organizations and decolonizing the narratives of discovery to achieve justice and liberation that require settlers or other actors to also change their assumptions or decolonize their narratives around colonization, land, and other key areas. Similarly, the struggles of the Tuareg peoples in the Sahara (Stevens, 2024) highlight that neither recognition in international forums nor adherence to UNDRIP guarantees the protection of their rights by states, as competing interests often shape priorities defined by a select few (Wallet Med Aboubakrine, 2024). This underscores the need for greater inclusivity and accountability in addressing the rights and needs of Indigenous Peoples within broader frameworks of justice and reconciliation.

According to Maslow's theory, which has been applied to victims of violence, individuals must meet their needs in a hierarchical order to overcome trauma and achieve their full potential (Poston, 2019). The model follows a pyramid structure, with progression to the next level occurring once the needs at the current level are fulfilled, eventually leading to self-actualization. However, in adapting Maslow's hierarchy, we propose a cyclical process rather than a linear progression, as we elaborate in the following sections (Figure 4).

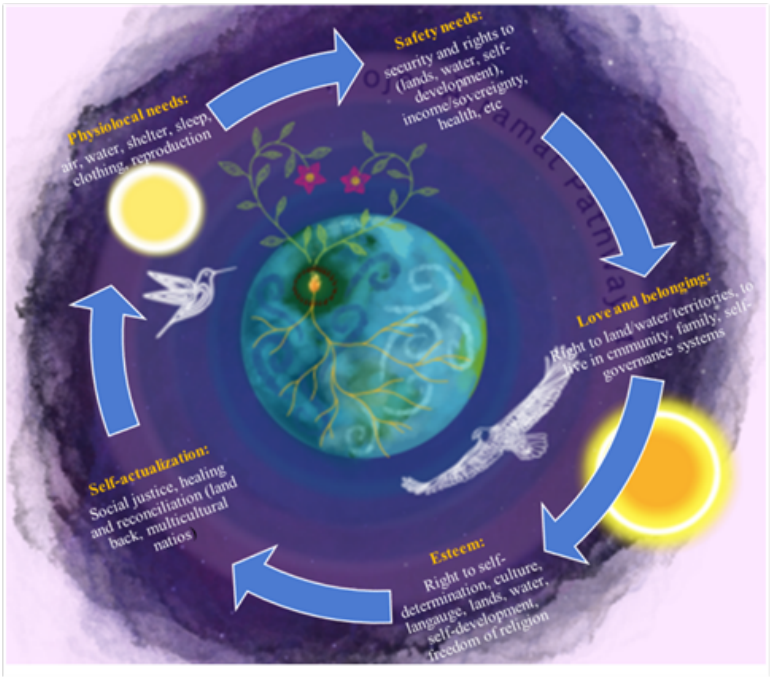

FIGURE 4. Ărramăt Project Circle of needs to achieve social justice, reconciliation, and healing (Adapted from Maslow's hierarchy of needs and Pathway 4 Strategic plan's illustration)

In this paper, we propose using Maslow's model while challenging the notion of a strict hierarchical pyramid of needs, as those needs do not always unfold in a fixed order. Instead, we acknowledge that needs can arise simultaneously or in different sequences depending on context. Applying an intersectional lens is crucial for understanding these variations within Indigenous communities, each of which has its own history, struggles, and priorities. For instance, some Indigenous Peoples with secure land rights may prioritize the preservation of their language and knowledge systems, while others may have different needs influenced by gender dynamics that affect land tenure. These needs can also vary even within the same community. Generational differences further complicate the picture.

Furthermore, while we acknowledge that healing should be a continuous journey toward ongoing self-actualization, it is important to recognize that many Indigenous societies, grounded in values of community, reciprocity, and shared responsibility, necessitate a collective approach to addressing needs rather than viewing them solely as individual concerns.

7.1. **Physiological needs: Whose needs?** In Maslow's hierarchy, physiological needs—such as food, water, housing, and sex—form the base of the pyramid. However, for Indigenous Peoples, these needs extend beyond the individual and include nature, biodiversity, land, water, air, and both material and immaterial entities. While we acknowledge the validity of Maslow's physiological needs, we propose broadening this level to encompass the needs of other entities, such as birds, trees, and sacred elements like water. For Indigenous Peoples, healing is intrinsically tied to a relationship with nature and spirituality. Healing is not an individual process; it includes nature, cosmology, identity, and spiritual elements unique to each person. For example, in the Bën Za (Zapotec) oral tradition, taking care of the forest is essential to preserving the river, which is a source of life and sustains sacred native seeds (corn, beans, squash, trees, etc.) (Martinez-Cruz, 2020a). Life is seen holistically, with no separation between its parts.

7.2. **Safety needs.** In Maslow's model, once physiological needs are met, individuals seek safety, which includes job security, health, and shelter. However, for Indigenous Peoples, safety extends to the protection of land, water, and biodiversity, all of which are interdependent. For example, the sacredness and protection of land come along with the safety of Indigenous Peoples that live in those lands (Martínez-Cruz et al., 2024). This shows that safety needs encompass more than individual security; they include the well-being of the entire ecosystem, reinforcing the connectedness of all life.

7.3. **Love and belonging needs.** The third level in Maslow's pyramid concerns love and belonging, which includes friendship, family, and a sense of community. Colonialism has severely disrupted social ties in Indigenous communities, which traditionally operate inside collective or moral economies that ensure the well-being of all members. During the COVID-19 pandemic, many Indigenous communities implemented collective lockdowns and relied on their social organization to ensure that everyone had access to necessities (Martínez-Cruz, 2020a; Martínez-Cruz & Rosado-May, 2022). Indigenous Peoples often defend their water and territories collectively, especially in the face of extractive industries that threaten their survival. Their sense of belonging extends beyond human relationships to include nature and the elements that sustain life in their territories.

The culture of collective action and responsibility means that there are several strategies for water and territorial defense that Indigenous Peoples perform collectively, especially in the face of the extractive industries and land grabbing that threaten their lives. Indigenous Peoples understand that they can survive only by being united and protecting the territories and waters alongside which they coexist. They understand that they are part of a collective and that this collective is

made up not only by people but also by nature and all the elements that allow the existence of life and the different relationships in their territories, waters, and the planet as a whole (Martínez-Cruz, 2020a, 2020b). Thus, belonging and love go beyond the forms that we commonly see in cities or individualistic societies.

7.4. **Esteem.** The fourth dimension of Maslow's hierarchy is esteem, which includes recognition, self-esteem, freedom, and status. For Indigenous Peoples, esteem involves the right to be treated as equals free from discrimination and to have their fundamental rights, including self-determination, respected. It also means having the ability to speak their languages, practice their cultures, and maintain their lands. Achieving this level often requires structural changes that allow Indigenous Peoples to reclaim their dignity and status. Some states do not recognize Indigenous Peoples, and even when recognition exists, intersectional issues can still impact the fulfillment of their rights. For instance, in Ecuador epistemic genocide occurred promoting a policy of one language, one culture, one religion (Calle & De Frutos, 2023) that was detrimental to Indigenous Peoples.

7.5. **Self-realization.** According to Maslow's pyramid, once the previous categories of needs are fulfilled, individuals may pursue self-actualization, which involves seeking to achieve their full potential and reflect on their needs from different perspectives. One critique of Maslow's theory is that it does not fully capture the complexity of human decision making or consider the possibility of fulfilling needs in different orders. Furthermore, Maslow's model focuses primarily on individual traumas, while Indigenous Peoples' self-actualization is often a collective process. Self-actualization is an ideal, but it may be achieved in smaller, incremental steps.

To achieve healing and reconciliation for Indigenous Peoples—and thus for society as a whole—specific actions leading to social justice and the transformation of power relations must be negotiated. While we cannot restore justice to its original state, we can engage with multiple actors to define what reconciliation should look like, identify the needs of different groups, and determine how Indigenous Peoples and others are willing to prioritize these needs. In this sense, social justice, reconciliation, and healing are not only processes but also continuous goals that evolve. If healing, social justice, and reconciliation are the end goals for Indigenous Peoples, then negotiating needs and priorities among different stakeholders is crucial for them to reach self-actualization and pursue collective healing.

8. Conclusion and way forward

As we have observed, the processes of social justice, reconciliation, and healing for Indigenous Peoples are diverse and do not align with

conventional frameworks in the literature. Much existing scholarship treats these processes as individual experiences, especially in relation to trauma, while often disconnecting them from nature, spirituality, and Indigenous worldviews. Similarly, conventional healing models focus primarily on individuals, overlooking collective entities such as Indigenous Peoples. In the pursuit of reconciliation, healing, and social justice, it is crucial to deconstruct and reframe Indigenous histories and narratives from their own perspectives—that is, to decolonize these narratives—so that Indigenous Peoples can express their truths without being victimized yet again. Furthermore, reconciliation, healing, and social justice are deeply connected; none of these concepts can be fully realized in a universal or static form. Instead, they represent an evolving, organic process shaped by everyday practices. Dismantling colonial narratives is a necessary first step toward acknowledging and achieving these goals.

The Ărramăt Project contributes significantly by offering global transformation pathways that help reimagine and frame how social justice, healing, and reconciliation might look through the lens of each of its 10 pathways. This paper serves as an initial exploration of these concepts, emphasizing that these processes are not linear and do not follow a fixed order. Different aspects of justice, healing, and reconciliation can unfold simultaneously as part of a broader, ongoing process. While social justice might to some extent be more feasible to operationalize in specific contexts, healing and reconciliation are more complex because they require the active participation of society at large and often involve conflicting interests. As an Indigenous-led initiative, the Ărramăt Project has the potential to advance social justice, reconciliation, and healing, although the degree of its impact will depend on the specific context, research focus, and willingness of all parties involved to engage in these processes. The project also plays a pivotal role in decolonizing narratives, offering insights through decolonized methodologies and telling stories from Indigenous perspectives. By establishing needs within the framework of Maslow's hierarchy, the project helps conceptualize what "self-realization" means in the context of social justice and, most importantly, what is necessary to achieve that goal.

Finally, as noted by Gómez-Regalado (2024), setting priorities, needs, and ideals for social justice requires a deep understanding of the complexities and specificities of each context. We must approach these issues from the perspective of the communities involved, avoiding the replication of social injustices or the perpetuation of discrimination through conventional frameworks. Ultimately, the Ărramăt Project can serve as a model for achieving social justice, reconciliation, and healing for all, guiding research, policy, and development efforts to support

biodiversity, human well-being, and planetary health. To better understand how this framework can work in and adapt real life, it is recommended to implement it by analyzing some of the pathways of the Ărramăt Project and fostering learning lessons.

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