



HEALING OUR SPIRIT WORLDWIDE

Ninth Gathering: Reflections and Learnings

Prepared for the First Nations Health Authority
and the International Indigenous Council for
Healing Our Spirit Worldwide



Healing Our
Spirit Worldwide
THE NINTH GATHERING



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Spirit Worldwide



First Nations Health Authority
Health through wellness



First Nations
Health Council



First Nations Health
Directors Association

Sharing experience for community wellness

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The First Nations Health Authority, First Nations Health Directors Association, First Nations Health Council and the International Indigenous Council for Healing Our Spirit Worldwide would like to acknowledge that the Ninth Gathering of Healing Our Spirit Worldwide took place on the ancestral and unceded territory of the xʷməθkʷəy̓əm (Musqueam), Skwx̱wú7mesh (Squamish) and səliłwətał (Tseil-Waututh) Nations and that has been stewarded by them since time immemorial.

The Healing Our Spirit Worldwide movement recognizes the journey of Indigenous people towards sovereignty and the importance of revitalizing traditional knowledge, medicines and cultural practices in support of wellness and healing. Finally, we wish to acknowledge the sponsors, volunteers and others who made the Ninth Gathering possible.



Healing Our
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THE NINTH GATHERING

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Ninth Gathering of Healing Our Spirit Worldwide took place between September 11 and 15, 2023, in Vancouver, British Columbia, on the unceded territory of the xʷməθkʷə́y əm (Musqueam), Sk̓wx̓ wú7mesh (Squamish) and səliłwətał (Tseil-Waututh) nations. The overall theme for the Gathering was *Resiliency through Indigenous Teachings, Celebrating Wellness, Health Governance, and Nation-Rebuilding*. The Gathering was hosted by three organizations: the First Nations Health Authority, the First Nations Health Directors Association and the First Nations Health Council.

The Healing Our Spirit Worldwide (HOSW) movement began as one woman's vision to create an international forum focused on alcohol and drug issues and programs in Indigenous communities across the globe. The first gathering was held in Edmonton, Canada, in 1992, and attracted people from all parts of the world. Since then, the gatherings have evolved and shifted their focus away from substance use towards a cultural and spiritual movement celebrating the strength and resiliency of Indigenous peoples, along with traditional and cultural practices around health and wellness.



This report tells the story of the Ninth Gathering using an Indigenous evaluation lens, and it meets the requirement of the International Indigenous Council of Healing Our Spirit Worldwide that hosts share the successes and challenges they faced so future Gathering organizers can learn from their experience.

A profound event, the Gathering successfully cultivated deep connections and memorable experiences among its participants. The Gathering was a vibrant opportunity for Indigenous peoples to come together, celebrating and sharing their rich cultural heritage through storytelling, dance, song and the exchange of knowledge.



“It was very powerful with all our peoples sharing culture, language, energy and identity. I believe Creator and our ancestors were present and ensured we felt their presence.”

The Gathering was effective at creating an inclusive environment that fostered diversity and met the needs of participants of various ages, nationalities, ethnicities, genders, sexual orientations and identities who are part of Indigenous cultures and communities worldwide. Almost all (90%) of the surveyed participants said they felt a connection with and learned from others at the Gathering.

In addition to daily keynote speakers, there were 60 sessions, 21 plenary or moderated gatherings and 38 workshops offered to participants, each of which focused on one of two main streams – *Health and Wellness* and *Health Governance and Leadership* – and under which a series of themes were addressed. The themes that engaged participants the most were *Healing, Culture and Wellness, Indigenous Resiliency, and Mental Health and Wellness*. These themes were explored in youth and Elders sessions, Māori plenary sessions, and sexuality and wellness sessions.

Participants shared that the activities and sessions were powerful, making direct reference to gained knowledge and tools, new relationships, and feelings of strength and solidarity. Participants expressed feelings of deep connection with each other and more broadly with the HOSW movement, overwhelmingly describing their experience of the Gathering as “once in a lifetime,” “unbelievable” and “powerful.” They stated that the Gathering offered them dedicated opportunities for spiritual, cultural and emotional connection; cultural sharing and learning; connection to the broader Indigenous community and worldviews; and a celebration of Indigenous joy. Participants shared that they felt connected to Indigenous peoples from other parts of the world and stated that this solidarity fostered feelings of home, belonging and pride.



“This Gathering has changed the way I think, the way I feel, and reignited my passion for reindigenizing myself, my family, my community and my Nation.”



This powerful experience is a testimony to the work of many individuals who planned the Gathering, with numerous committees and groups, hosts, partners and sponsors being integral to preparing for and delivering the event. Of crucial importance were the coordinated knowledge, efforts and enthusiasm of staff and volunteers, as well as a contracted project manager and planning coordinator. The venue was beautiful and its layout allowed for connection, knowledge-sharing and celebration.



Taking all this together, the Gathering successfully provided attendees with a transformative experience and opportunities for cultural exchange, sharing, connection and relationship-building. Participants – including organizers, staff, volunteers, presenters, vendors and sponsors – had an overwhelmingly positive experience, benefiting from new cultural learnings, a knowledge of innovative health care practices, and an expanded sense of Indigenous health, healing and wellness.



THE EVALUATION OF THE NINTH GATHERING HAS HIGHLIGHTED THE IMPORTANCE OF:

- Having well-established governance and organizational structures with clear accountabilities and dedicated, knowledgeable staffing;
- A planning timeline and approach that can address the complexity of a large international event (e.g., procurement, staffing, technology solutions, fundraising, handling of travel and accommodation, and more);
- Adequate training and support for staff and volunteers, with back-ups for key positions;
- Sustained communications with those taking part in the Gathering and broader outreach to Indigenous peoples outside of North America;
- Selecting a venue that supports connection, cultural sharing and accessibility;
- Registration and abstract management software programs that are easy for organizers and participants to use;
- Dedicated efforts and supports for youth, Elders and 2SLGBTQQIA+ in concert with those with mobility, physical, mental health, cultural and linguistic needs;
- Addressing financial barriers to participation;
- Offering event materials in various forms;
- Ensuring that allowances are made to foster connections among all participants (including speakers, organizers and vendors) with the HOSW Movement; and
- Finding opportunities to gain knowledge of Indigenous culture in its many forms, including through land-based experiences.

Our intent is that these reflections and learnings will inform and inspire future hosts to build upon the Gathering and further transform the HOSW movement.

"This was such a spiritual, healing gathering. I learned so much to bring back to the community to help and support each and every one of them."



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Background of the Ninth Gathering of Healing Our Spirit Worldwide

THE HEALING OUR SPIRIT WORLDWIDE MOVEMENT

The Ninth Gathering of Healing Our Spirit Worldwide (HOSW) draws its roots from the vision of Dr. Maggie Hodgson to create an international movement focused on alcohol and drug issues in Indigenous communities.¹ The first gathering, held in Edmonton in 1992, attracted 3,500 people from 17 countries, and since then the gathering has been held in the following cities:

- 1994 – Sydney, Australia
- 1998 – Rotorua, Aotearoa (New Zealand)
- 2002 – Albuquerque, USA
- 2006 – Edmonton, Canada
- 2010 – Oahu, Hawaii
- 2015 – Hamilton, New Zealand
- 2018 – Sydney, Australia

The International Indigenous Council for Healing Our Spirit Worldwide, or IICHOSW, is the governance body that supports, guides and informs the hosts of HOSW gatherings. The vision of the IICHOSW is to ensure Indigenous peoples worldwide can come together every four years to share their stories of wellness and endurance while also celebrating unity within an ever-changing environment.

Since 1992, the gatherings have evolved and shifted their focus away from substance use to a cultural and spiritual movement celebrating the strength and resiliency of Indigenous peoples and their traditional and cultural practices around health and wellness.

The Gathering was originally planned for March 2022, but was delayed due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The rescheduled event was held from September 11 to 15, 2023, in Vancouver, British Columbia, on the unceded territory of the Musqueam, Squamish and Tsleil-Waututh Nations.

¹The Governor General of Canada. Dr. Maggie Hodgson: Order of Canada.

<https://www.gg.ca/en/honours/recipient/146-8896>

The overall theme for the gathering was *Resiliency through Indigenous Teachings, Celebrating Wellness, Health Governance, and Nation-Rebuilding*. The objectives were to:

- Showcase how Indigenous people have control of their health, healing and wellness, based on their culture, practices and language.
- Provide a safe space for social and intellectual discussion, and for Indigenous leaders to work together on challenges relating to Indigenous health, healing and wellness.
- Provide participants with an opportunity to partake in different Indigenous ceremonies, culture and presentations.²

The gathering and the broader HOSW movement take direction from the Covenant. The Covenant, with its focus on community,³ was developed in 2002 and helps to guide the movement in its support of the health, healing, and self determination of Indigenous peoples.⁴ It is also meant to be evergreen and an integral part of growing the HOSW movement.



² For the purposes of the evaluation, “participants” refers to all those taking part regardless of registration status (paid versus unpaid). This includes delegates, students, youth, Elders, speakers, organizers and vendors.

³As per the Memorandum of Understanding for the Ninth Gathering between the FNHA and the IICHOSW.

⁴IIC-FNHA MOU signed March 2022. See: [Healing Our Spirit Worldwide Covenant \(youtube.com\) https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZKrHGhj3n-E](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZKrHGhj3n-E).

HOSW Covenant, 2002

Celebrating that the Creator has given Indigenous Peoples, who belong to the land and the sea, a unique and rich collection of gifts including mother earth, the sky and the water, our families and nations, our culture and wisdom and our own lives;

Recognizing that these gifts rest at the heart of our past, our present and our future;

Believing that the Spirit is the energy that empowers us to share, replenish, protect and respect these gifts according to the Creator's design;

Remembering the devastation and confusions that colonization brought, including alcohol and disease;

Grieving for the land taken and loss of communal life;

We, the Indigenous Peoples of the world, have come together as part of the Healing Our Spirit Worldwide movement to declare with one voice and heart our resolve to strengthen the Spirit of our Nations and Peoples, to clear from our hearts and minds the clouds of confusion and doubt;

We hold as true and as our guide the teaching of our grandmothers and grandfathers;

We hold a sacred role to protect, maintain and respect the Creator's gifts so that our children and generations of children after them may live a healthy and rich life;

Our responsibility to address, enhance and restore our sacred role; as custodians of these gifts, we need to make wise decisions because we are accountable to the Creator and to generations to come;

The health and wellbeing of our people and nations is built on our ability to maintain compassionate, functioning relationships within ourselves, with the earth, each other, our families and communities;

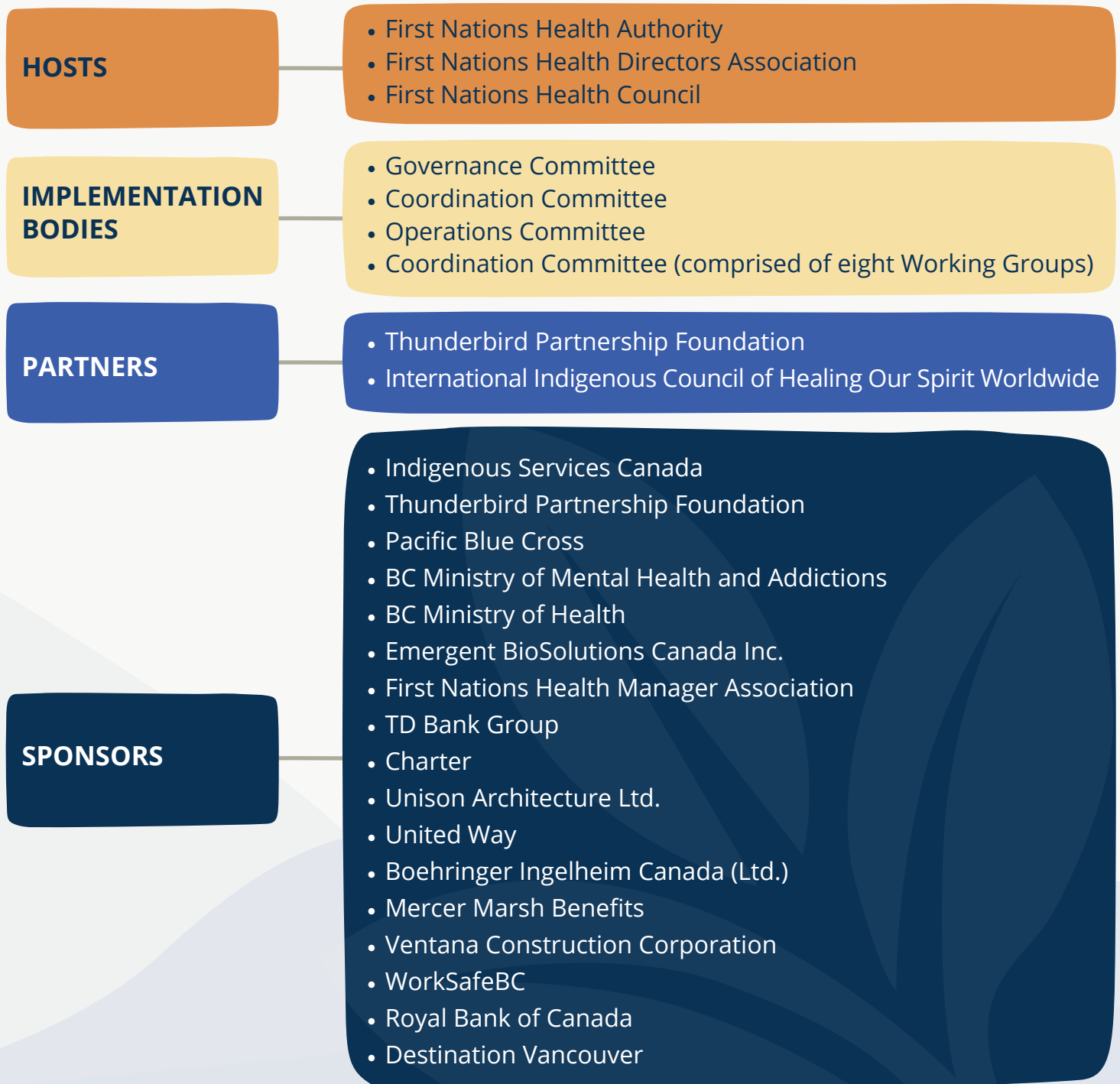
Knowledge and wisdom are our partners and we must enrich them both and use them well if our children are to build a meaningful future;

We commit ourselves to work in unity and with resolve to strengthen and heal the spirits of our peoples.

GOVERNANCE AND OPERATIONS

The Gathering was hosted by three organizations: the First Nations Health Authority (FNHA), the First Nations Health Directors Association (FNHDA) and the First Nations Health Council (FNHC). The delivery of the Gathering was handled through a series of committees and working groups, collectively referred to in this report as the “Implementation Bodies.” These Implementation Bodies included the Governance Committee, Operations Committee and the Coordination Committee, which was made up of eight Working Groups, all in collaboration with the IICHOSW and the Thunderbird Partnership Foundation. This structure and the Gathering’s sponsors are illustrated in the figure below.

Figure 1: Hosts, Implementation Bodies, Partners and Sponsors of the Gathering





To support overall coordination, a project management consultant was hired on contract in January 2022 and a dedicated planner was hired in March 2023. A seconded FNHA staff person was responsible for organizing and supporting volunteers for two weeks before and after the event.

Close to three hundred (275) volunteers, most of whom were FNHA staff, supported the Gathering itself, aiding participants as they registered for sessions and activities, made their way around the venue and encountered any specific issues. Volunteers wore brown vests to identify themselves, and were staged at key locations, including the check-in, information, help desks and evaluation booth, and they were stationed to support the dedicated Elders and Youth spaces. Volunteers also helped vendors and exhibitors access and set up their booths and, at times, staffing them. Additionally, volunteers were available during each of the sessions and workshops to help presenters, such as by sharing microphones around the room during question-and-answer periods. All volunteers were given a gift in recognition of their time.

Further details on resourcing and the use of groups is found in [Appendix A: Planning and Delivery Structures and Roles](#).

AGENDA OF THE HOSW

The overall theme of the Ninth Gathering was *Resiliency through Indigenous Teachings, Celebrating Wellness, Health Governance and Nation-Rebuilding*. In keeping with this were two main streams, *Health and Wellness* and *Health Governance and Leadership*.

The *Health and Wellness* stream focused on:

- Celebrating Health and Wellness
- Indigenous Healing, Culture, Health Innovation and Transformation
- Wellness and Healing Together: A Trauma-Informed Approach
- Community Strength and Resilience



Those presenting in this stream, and the selected area(s) of focus, were asked to share their experiences, insights and learnings relating to health promotion, prevention, education and awareness programs; meaningful and respectful ways of gathering and sharing research, data, information and knowledge; health program development, implementation and evaluation; programs providing for culturally safe, comprehensive and coordinated approaches to mental health, healing and wellness of Indigenous people; innovative projects addressing substance use and addictions; initiatives of, and that support, Indigenous youth (16 to 29); and the essential role of the wisdom of Elders (65+).

The *Health Governance and Leadership* stream had a distinct emphasis on both health governance and health leadership, respectively.

Over the five days of the Gathering, the agenda included keynote speakers, youth and Elder activities, cultural activities, dancing, singing, nightly events, concurrent sessions and workshops. In addition to planned activities, Gathering organizers laid out the physical spaces of the Vancouver Convention Centre to encourage connection, cultural sharing and learning.

Following the first day, each day of the Gathering saw a different country partnered with a Canadian region as the official hosts, enabling Indigenous people from Canada to showcase their songs, dances and regalia alongside an international Indigenous group.

Participants were encouraged to wear their traditional regalia and/or clothing specific to their nation. Many individuals wore ribbon skirts, vamps, ribbon shirts and traditional jewelry.

Over the five days of the Gathering there were more than 60 concurrent sessions across 28 rooms and 136 presentations, 38 workshop sessions with 105 workshops, five posters, 21 plenary and moderator-hosted sessions, eight keynote addresses and eight cultural events and/or dinner speakers. The 477 speakers that attended the Gathering came from across Canada, as well as the continental United States, Aotearoa, Australia and Hawaii.



THE PASSING OF
THE CANOE TO THE
FNHA CEREMONY
OCCURRED PRIOR
TO THE START OF
THE GATHERING,
ON SUNDAY,
SEPTEMBER 10.

KIALOA
KAPUHA, HAWAII • HONOLULU, HAWAII

PRE-GATHERING

The Passing of the Canoe to the FNHA Ceremony occurred before the start of the Gathering, on Sunday, September 10. This ceremony, hosted by the Musqueam Nation, was a passing of the canoe that had been gifted to the IICHOSW from Hawaiian delegations in a previous Gathering.

DAY ONE

Day one marked the official beginning of events at the Gathering and began with the Pipe Ceremony. At check-in, participants received their name tags and conference bags and registered for sessions. The Parade of Nations followed with a showcasing of Indigenous communities and culture. Next came the Opening Ceremony and welcome from the host First Nations that was followed by speakers and a closing. A ticketed dinner event in honour of Dr. Maggie Hodgson was held with Dr. James Makokis and Anthony Johnson as keynote speakers. A guest First Nations chef assisted in the preparation of a meal that included First Nations traditional foods.



DAY TWO

Day two began with a cultural welcome from the day's hosts, Vancouver Island, BC, and Australia. The theme in the morning sessions was *Health Governance and Leadership* with keynote speaker Sue Ann Hunter sharing the story of the Indigenous Peoples of Victoria, Australia. A plenary session on the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples and healing rounded out the morning. The afternoon included sessions and workshops focused on the *Health Governance and Leadership* theme, as well as two FNHC sessions, one on "Reclaiming Wellness through BC's First Nations Health Governance Structure" and one on "BC First Nations Health Council's 10-Year Strategy on the Social Determinants of Health." Later in the evening, participants were encouraged to enjoy a weaving activity or watch the film "Smoke Signals."



DAY THREE

Day three's theme was *Health Innovation and Transformation*. The BC Northern Region, the United States and Hawaii were the day's hosts and offered a cultural welcome to the Gathering participants. Dr. Sheri-Ann Daniels, Chelsey Luger and Anthony Thosh Collins were the keynote speakers. The day's plenary was entitled "Overcoming the Toxic Drug Crisis." The FNHA presented on the "Journey Towards Cultural Safety and Humility" and "FNHA's Health Innovation and Transformation." The night ended with a medicine plant workshop and the film "Hunt for the Wilderpeople."



DAY FOUR

Keynote speaker Riana Manuel opened day four along with a cultural welcome from BC's Interior Region and Aotearoa. The plenary session was entitled "Community Healing and Resiliency" and aligned with the day's theme, *Community Strength and Resilience*. The FNHDA presented on "Our Story" and "Decolonizing Health Care." Two cultural events were offered in the evening: the Three Host Nations Singing and Dancing Workshop and Two-Spirit Night. In a HOSW first, the Gathering hosted a Two-Spirit Night that brought together members of the 2SLGBTQQIA+ community to honour their contributions and cultural importance to the Indigenous community. Drag performances, rap, song and dance were highlights of the evening.



DAY FIVE

The Gathering's theme on the last day was *Indigenous Healing, Culture, Teachings and Wellness*. The day was hosted by the BC Fraser Salish region and Canadian Indigenous delegations. To mark the closing, three keynote speakers presented and participated in a question-and-answer period. Dr. Ed Connors, Dr. Lorna Williams and Chase Campeau offered Elder and youth perspectives on Indigenous healing, culture, teachings and wellness. Youth and Elders closed the morning plenary session with a video on the climate emergency. This was followed by cultural activities and the closing ceremonies hosted by the Musqueam, Squamish and Tseil Waututh nations.



For a more detailed version of the agenda please see: <https://hosw.com/wp-content/uploads/HOSW-Conference-Agenda-2023.pdf>

VENUE FOR THE GATHERING

The Gathering took place at the Vancouver Convention Centre, which is situated on Coal Harbour, in Vancouver, British Columbia. The 466,500 square foot building offered a large dining hall on the ground (basement) level, multiple ballrooms, a Gathering Space, vendor and exhibitor area, an Elder and Youth room, and a space on the second level for concurrent workshops. There were also cultural supports, sessions and poster presentations on the third level, all accessed by way of escalators or two elevators.

Organizers placed couches and chairs throughout the venue to encourage conversation, cultural connection, rest and contemplation. The venue also had tables for participants to sit and share coffee and snacks. The Youth Room had games, a medicine-making station, arts and crafts, and a lounge space. The Elders' Room was a dedicated space to rest and recharge with tables, chairs, food and drink. Staff and volunteers were stationed to host and help Elders and Youth in these spaces.



The large open spaces and seating throughout the venue allowed for spontaneous interaction, cultural sharing and connection to take place. This was especially the case with the Gathering Space, a glass-walled open area that looked out to Coal Harbour and the mountains beyond, and where planned cultural activities, events and demonstrations as well as spontaneous singing, drumming and dancing occurred regularly. Participants were encouraged to join activities, share song and dance, take part in cultural activities and practices, and make time to connect with others. The Gathering Space included couches and rest areas where participants could find a location for quiet contemplation and one-on-one conversations, as well as a monitor and chairs so people could watch events taking place in the main ballroom.

Next to the Gathering Space were vendor and exhibitor booths, allowing participants to walk through the different aisles while enjoying the nearby event sounds of singing and drumming. The Gathering hosted approximately 35 vendors and 28 exhibitors who showcased their knowledge, skills, arts and crafts, and clothing. Most vendors were Indigenous to Canada, with one travelling from New Zealand and two from the United States.



The keynotes, plenary speakers, cultural events and celebrations took place in the Main Ballroom. With its three large screens, centre stage and rows of seating, the Main Ballroom was an important space for participants to connect and share their experiences and knowledge.

All participants had access to the cultural wellness area situated on the third floor, overlooking the ocean. In this area, smudging (performed on the second-floor outdoor terrace), yoga, Reiki and various forms of healing were offered. Participants signed up for these activities ahead of time through the CVENT application.

A desk was staffed at this location to help participants access the services they registered for. Approximately 30 healers and cultural support staff from various regions of British Columbia took part. Complementing the wellness area, the outdoor space surrounding the convention centre offered participants an area to walk, explore and take in the views – all activities that support wellness. The venue also offered a first aid room, media room, meeting space and discussion rooms for participants to engage and connect or hold business meetings in a more private setting.

Select maps of the venue are shown in [Appendix B: Venue Layout](#).



FUNDING AND INVESTMENTS

Revenue for the Gathering came to just over \$3.5 million, of which \$675,000 was in the form of sponsorships. Expenditures totalled close to \$4.0 million, with registration, the use of contractors and support staff, and venue contracts accounting for almost \$1.4 million of this amount. The venue and catering made up another \$1.8 million; speaker, guest and practitioner accommodation, travel, meals, honorariums and other such costs added \$0.5 million; and event collateral accounted for the remainder at \$0.3 million. The FNHA also provided community sponsorship for one delegate from each BC First Nation and one health lead, with funding levels based on the distance from the First Nations community to Vancouver.

As noted earlier, specific components of the Gathering were supported by contractors and consultants, including audiovisual services and catering. A contractor also helped with registrations and payment (two full-time staff for the two months leading up to the Gathering). On the first day of the Gathering, this contractor had 10 staff and 10 volunteers onsite for 10 registration tables, as well as a support desk to answer questions and help participants having trouble with CVENT, the conference software application. CVENT was the session registration, program and abstract management platform for the Gathering and was actively used by participants and organizers. Participants could download the CVENT application to their mobile devices at check-in (using the QR code made available). Three hundred paper programs were printed. For the organizers, the CVENT application was used to produce name badges and report on the demographics of participants, as well as to manage and review Gathering abstracts. The 497 workshop, session and poster presentation abstracts were received and managed through the software.



Telling the Story of the Gathering

The FNHA engaged professional services firm MNP LLP to evaluate the HOSW. As the evaluator, MNP worked in close collaboration with the FNHA and the Evaluation Working Group to co-develop the evaluation methods and tools, with a focus on Indigenous ways of knowing, being and communicating.

A guiding framework for the evaluation was prepared and presented to the HOSW Governance Committee, and then updated based on the direction received. This included the importance of balancing western and Indigenous worldviews in the evaluative work and reframing it as a “Reflection and Relationship Framework.”



Three main themes organized the guiding questions and indicators within the Reflection and Relationship Framework, with each providing related learnings:

- Reflections on Planning the Gathering
- Reflections on the Delivery of the Gathering
- Reflections on the Outcomes of the Gathering

In keeping with the Indigenous lens, evaluation methods centred on making meaningful observations and gaining the perspectives of Gathering participants, partners and others, including speakers, hosts, Implementation Bodies and sponsors.

Adding to this, the host organizers provided a photo booth, 360 video booth and “Sharpie wall” where participants could write their thoughts about the Gathering and their interaction with the Covenant. These methods were interactive and popular, with participants often waiting in lines to add their opinions and stories.

Because most of the one-on-one conversations and storytelling sessions were captured using handwritten notes, the evaluation team manually scanned 650 pages and used an automated text extractor to import the data. Once imported, this data was coded into themes with the help of the analytics software tool NVIVO. The evaluation team also downloaded the responses from Survey Sparrow into Microsoft Excel to review and analyze the survey results.

The themes emerging from this analysis were then interpreted using appreciative inquiry, a strength-based evaluation methodology that identifies the best of what has occurred, notes opportunities for improvement and highlights successes to bring forward. Using this strength-based approach, the evaluation team sought to identify and understand the accomplishments and successes of the Gathering, as well as the areas for strengthening.

See [Appendix C: Reflection and Learning Approaches](#) for more information on the evaluation tools and approaches.

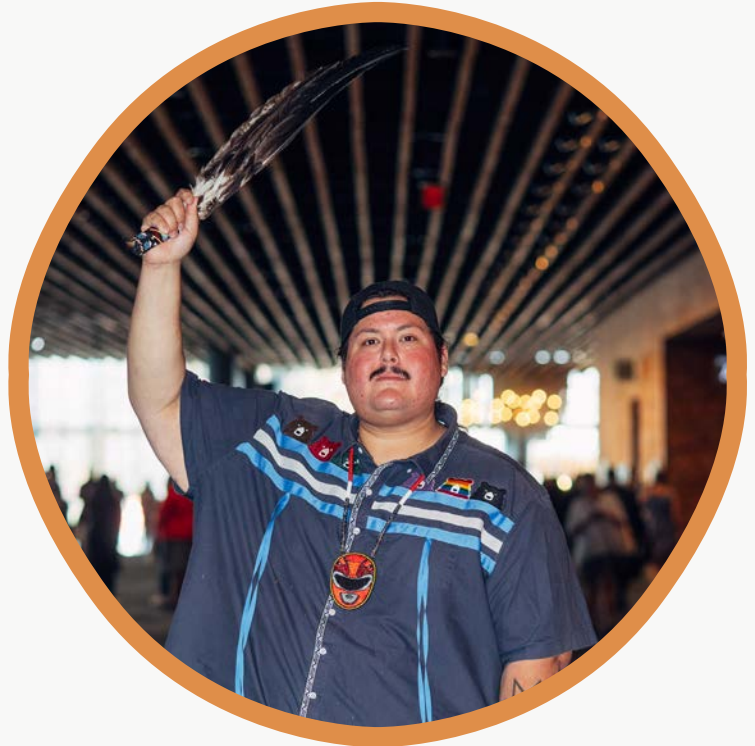


Reflections and Learnings

The story of the Gathering can be told through reflections on the main themes of planning, delivery and outcomes – themes that also point to opportunities for the future.

REFLECTIONS ON PLANNING

Based on the one-on-one conversations and the post-Gathering dialogues, the organization of the Gathering was seen as a successful collaborative effort, involving the hosts, IICHOSW and the Implementation Bodies, whose specialized committees and working groups successfully catered to nearly 4,000 participants. The planning for the Gathering set out the priorities and approaches to create a welcoming and inclusive environment that accommodated the diverse needs of participants from various age groups, nationalities, ethnicities, genders, sexual identities and orientations, who were attending the event from Indigenous cultures and communities worldwide.



Various committees and groups along with the hosts, partners and contractors were integral to this planning, helped by a shared understanding of roles and responsibilities. Adding to this was the coordinated knowledge, efforts and enthusiasm of staff and volunteers, as well as the experience of the contracted project manager and planning coordinator. The use of technology was another positive contributor, providing a way to share information, communicate and coordinate documents. These and other reflections on the planning for the Gathering are presented in more detail below.

GOVERNANCE

During the planning phase of the Gathering, partners noted how the executive sponsor, hosts, Implementation Bodies and Working Groups were largely well-organized, efficient in how they functioned and responsive to needs. Roles were clearly set out and means of communication were well established, as seen in the Terms of Reference.

The collaboration and coordination between the FNHA, FNHC, FNHDA, IICHOSW, Implementation Bodies and Working Groups in the planning stages was felt to be strong and well defined. Despite the event's size and complexity, the Hosts, various committees and groups, partners and contractors successfully navigated stressful moments in the planning stages.

The formation of specialized committees, such as those for youth and Elders, helped keep a focus on preparations and planning to support the needs of various participants.

RESOURCE PLANNING

Over the course of 18 months, more than 32 individuals contributed to the organization of the Gathering, including the two dedicated roles of a project manager and planning coordinator. The project manager was vital to planning the Gathering, offering in-depth experience in coordination and management; well-established relationships regionally, nationally and internationally; and a deep understanding of the FNHA, its values and mandate.

The planning around volunteers, including their roles and their individual strengths and interests, was another contributor to the success of the Gathering. Organizers sought to provide FNHA volunteers (about 275 of them) with ways to learn and to take on diverse roles by locating them across the venue during the Gathering. These helping roles were short term, with volunteers flexibly changing their position and adapting to the ongoing needs of the Gathering.

The staff, leads and volunteers were, for the most part, FNHA employees who brought their knowledge of the organization's related processes, policies and protocols. This was a strength in the planning phase, as was their buy-in and enthusiasm for the Gathering.



The way by which tasks were assigned among the network of leads, staff and volunteers also helped with the Gathering's overall success. However, there were some challenges in the timing of these assignments. For example, the request to prepare a volunteer schedule a few weeks before the Gathering proved challenging when it came to confirming availability and making revisions over this period. In some instances, volunteers signed up without understanding the level of commitment needed over the week of the Gathering (i.e., some staff and volunteers were only available for one day, despite an earlier expectation of four to five days). Given the event's size and scope, this led to staffing pressures, particularly in critical logistical areas like hotel and travel coordination, vendor and exhibitor relations, and overall event management. This was confirmed by organizers and Working Group members who reflected in the one-on-one conversations and in the post-Gathering dialogues that attention to staffing levels, added time for training, and recruitment of team members and volunteers with large event skill sets would be helpful for future gatherings.



FINANCIAL ACCESSIBILITY

The costs associated with registration, travel and lodging were seen as financial barriers for some participants. Many participants observed that more financial supports would have increased participation and access, especially for communities outside of British Columbia and Canada. Establishing relationships with nearby post-secondary institutions to explore the use of dormitories and billeting as a cost-effective way to house participants, and then ensuring that these options were well known, serves as one example of how this might be addressed in the planning stages. Alternative dates outside of high season might also lessen financial barriers. However, it should also be recognized that organizers prioritized broadening access for Indigenous communities across British Columbia. Organizers noted in the post-event dialogues that there were scholarships offered along with other forms of funding for accessibility. As outlined in [Appendix B](#), this included close to \$22,000 for youth scholarships and travel.

“There was a focus on Youth, but they couldn’t afford to attend.”

– Participant

COMMUNICATIONS, MEDIA AND ADVERTISING

The FNHA Communications Team developed a comprehensive communication strategy leading up to the Gathering. This included holding a logo design contest, developing a custom Gathering website, launching social media campaigns and targeting advertisements at international events and through local media in geographic regions that had lower than expected registrations, such as the continental United States.

The HOSW logo design, created by Gregory Barker of the Bonaparte Indian Band, was selected from 44 logo contest entries. In his words:

- The plant represents a starting point, growth and resilience.
- The mountains represent the obstacles faced by Indigenous peoples.
- The sun represents the clarity and strength of those that have endured and came out on top.
- The rays are separate, representing the many Indigenous people, from all parts. They shine together.
- Togetherness is represented by the circle around the rays.
- The bird represents movement, freedom and strength.



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In addition, 10 youth submitted logos for the contest, and these were displayed throughout the Gathering.

The HOSW website was regularly updated prior to the Gathering. Increased web traffic was seen in the month before the event, with the program and speakers being the most popular information viewed (28,670 views), followed by registration (19,689 views) and logistical details on Vancouver, accommodations, the venue, tourist information, travel requirements and links (9,612 views).

Regular social media posts were also created leading up to the Gathering with high levels of engagement across Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, LinkedIn and YouTube to advertise the Gathering and promote registration.

When it came to pre-Gathering communications, participants said they would have appreciated more detailed descriptions of events and activities.

Gathering programs and agendas were available exclusively online through the CVENT application. Some participants said they would have liked to have more paper copies of the Gathering program (agenda).

REGISTRATION PLANNING

Registration through the FNHA's website occurred between June 15, 2022, and September 15, 2023. The early bird registration rates closed on April 15, five months before the Gathering. Once registered, participants were offered access to the CVENT application to learn more about the venue and sign up for sessions, workshops, dinners and activities.

Most participants – including organizers and staff, vendors, exhibitors and presenters – said there was room for improvement around check-in day logistics. Their experiences, and a description of how they were addressed, are described in the section on registration as part of the “Reflections on Delivery.”

Participants also said they would have liked more details about the agenda with added descriptions of events and activities to help them decide which events to attend.

TECHNOLOGY AND STAGE MANAGEMENT SUPPORTS

The Gathering relied on the extensive use of technology. Presenters and speakers, totalling 477 voices, as well as popular sessions, were broadcast across the venue into smaller spaces and meeting rooms. The TV area within the exhibitor and vendor space was a well-appreciated way for participants to access information. The need for software tools, audio and visual technology, and the related logistics of set-up and removal at the Gathering, meant organizers spent considerable time in planning this aspect of the event.

The organizers of the Gathering received 497 abstracts. While this shows the extent of interest and engagement in the Gathering and the HOSW movement, the high numbers of abstracts presented a challenge for the CVENT software tool. This underlines the need to carefully consider the technology chosen to support event hosting and abstract management.

Organizers, staff, volunteers and presenters suggested there could be value in having a technology working group and a lead stage manager to coordinate all system, audio and visual, and related needs. A lead stage manager would be responsible for coordinating the intersecting technology needs, audiovisual requirements and real-time decision-making, as well as problem-solving during the event.



THE EVENT'S ATMOSPHERE WAS
INFUSED WITH A SENSE OF UNITY,
SHARED PURPOSE, MEANINGFUL
INTERACTIONS AND CULTURAL
EXCHANGE.



REFLECTIONS ON DELIVERY

The Gathering was a profound event, successfully cultivating deep connections and memorable experiences among its diverse array of participants. It served as a vibrant platform for Indigenous peoples to come together, to celebrate and share their rich cultural heritage through storytelling, dance and song, and to exchange knowledge. The event's atmosphere was infused with a sense of unity, shared purpose, meaningful interactions and cultural exchange. The beautiful venue was perceived as offering a space for connection, knowledge-sharing and celebration, and the availability of food was well received.



Participants said they found it easy to register for the Gathering on the HOSW website. While there were some challenges in using the CVENT application for session registration and obtaining information, participants acknowledged that staff and volunteers were exceptionally helpful. The layout of the venue allowed for connection, knowledge-sharing and celebration. More seating and mobility aids, signage and support services would have been helpful, however, especially for Elders as well as those who are visually impaired or hard of hearing.




Vendors and exhibitors were located next to the Gathering Space. Participants spoke positively about the diversity of what was offered at the booths and the extent to which the products and information offered also included knowledge and culture. The vendors and exhibitors shared this enthusiasm. However, they also noted it would have been helpful to have access to the venue ahead of time for set-up purposes.

Participants shared that the activities and sessions were powerful, making direct reference to gaining new knowledge and tools, forging new relationships, and feeling strength and solidarity. Participants also enjoyed the more spontaneous, unplanned connections that were made in between sessions and cultural activities. Combined with the Parade of Nations, Two-Spirit Night and other offerings, this added to feelings of connection with the HOSW movement.

Participants suggested that more cultural healing services could have been offered, including land-based activities. And while the Gathering was viewed to be inclusive, participants noted there could have been more opportunities to build on engagement with Inuit, Métis and Indigenous peoples from South America, northern Europe and the United States, as well as youth and 2SLGBTQIA+ people. These and other reflections on the delivery of the Gathering are presented in more detail on the following pages.



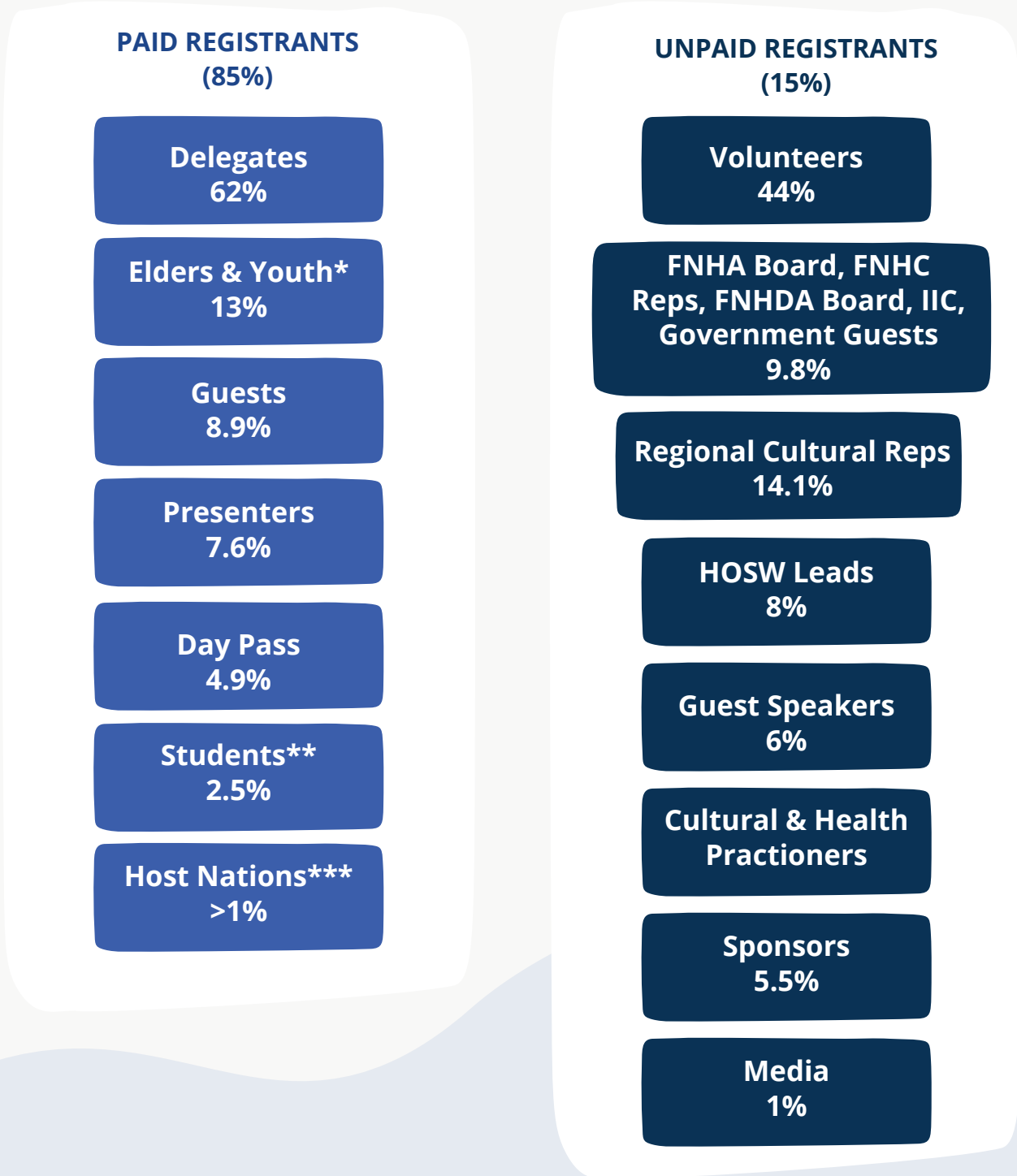


THE GATHERING BROUGHT TOGETHER THOUSANDS OF INDIGENOUS AS WELL AS NON-INDIGENOUS PEOPLES FROM CANADA, THE CONTINENTAL US, AOTEAROA, AUSTRALIA, HAWAII AND OTHER GEOGRAPHIES.

PARTICIPANT REGISTRATIONS

The Gathering brought together thousands of Indigenous as well as non-Indigenous peoples from Canada, the continental US, Aotearoa, Australia, Hawaii and other geographies. Registration data, collected by the FNHA, shows a total of 3,726 Gathering participants (see Figure 2 below).

Figure 2: Gathering Participants: Breakdown of Paying Versus Non-Paying Registrants



Please note this section is based on FNHA demographic data.

*Youth: those aged under 30 years. ** Students: enrolled at post-secondary.

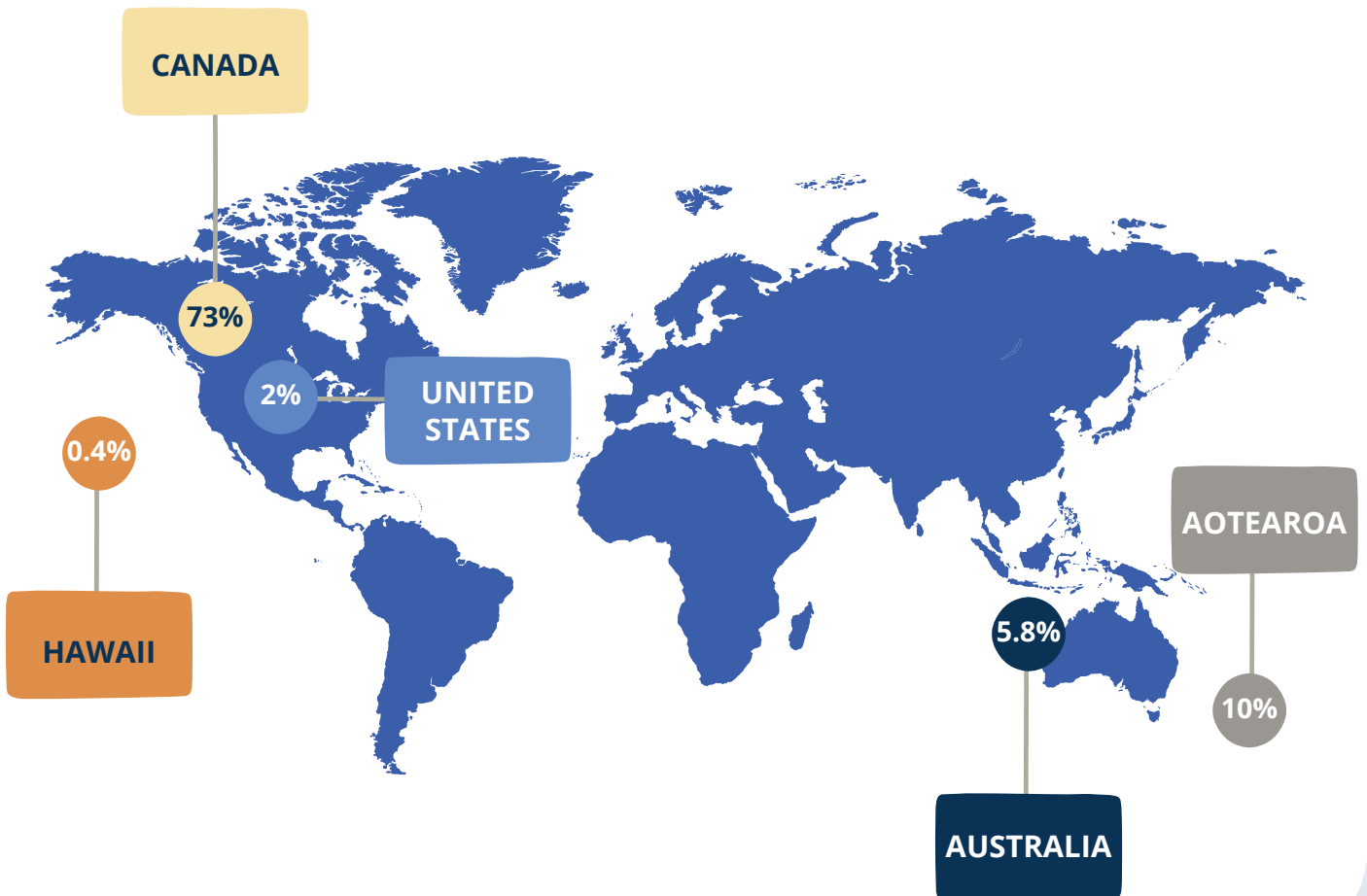
***Host Nations: Musqueam, Squamish and Tsleil-Waututh.

PARTICIPANT COUNTRY OF ORIGIN

The Gathering hosted Indigenous peoples from seven countries. Of the 3,726 registered, 73% (n=2,722) reported their origin country as Canada, with another 10% (n=376) stating Aotearoa. The remaining participants were from Australia (5.8%, n=217), continental United States (2%, n=72) and Hawaii (0.4%, n=15). Three participants identified the United Kingdom and Tahiti as their county of origin. There were 8.8% (n=321) who did not share their country of origin (see Figure 3 below).



Figure 3: Gathering Registrant Countries



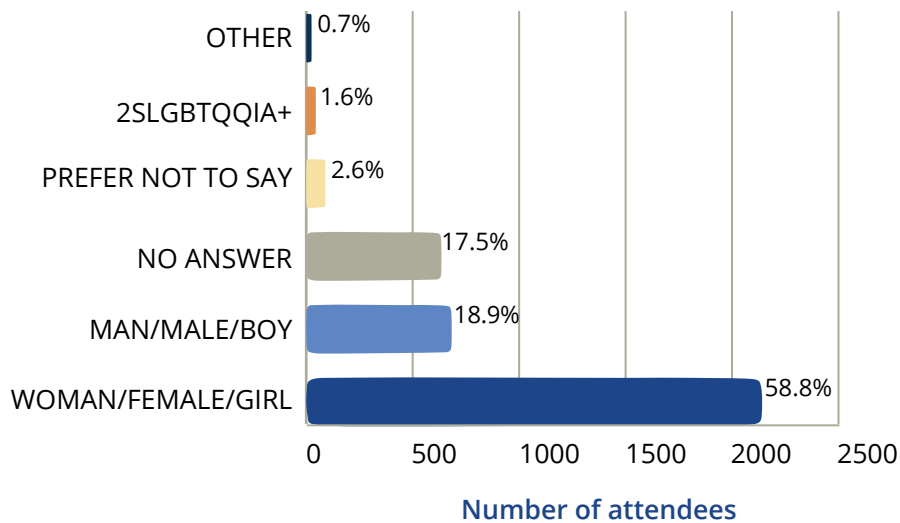
AGE OF PARTICIPANTS

Most, 71% (n=2,645), of the Gathering participants were adults between the ages of 30 to 64. Elders made up 13% (n=483) of those in attendance and youth represented another 7.6% (n=285). Some participants (9%, n=316) did not provide their age.

GENDER AND SEXUAL IDENTITIES OF PARTICIPANTS

Most, 59% (n=2,196), of the participants identified as "Woman/Female/Girl", with another 19% (n=709) as "Man/Male/Boy", 3% (n=96) as "Other" and 2% (n=69) as 2SLGBTQIA+. Less than 1% (n=26) of registered participants selected "Prefer Not to Say" (see Figure 4 below).

Figure 4: Gender and Sexual Identity of Participants

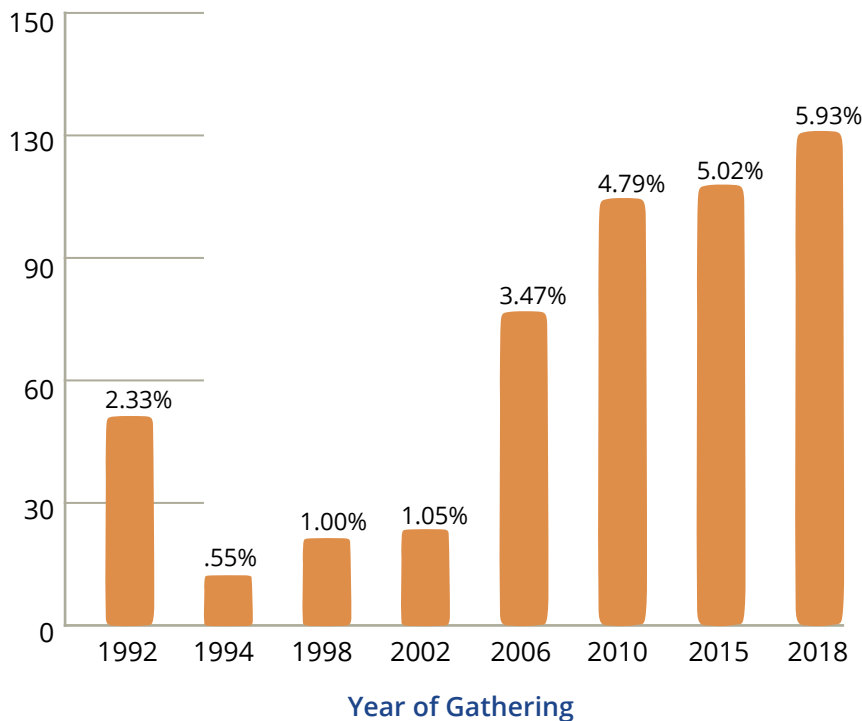




PARTICIPANT ATTENDANCE AT PRIOR GATHERINGS

Based on the registration data, 130 participants had attended the 2018 Gathering, 110 attended the 2015 Gathering and 105 had attended the 2010 Gathering. Of the 3,726 participants at the 2023 Gathering, 14% had attended previous Gatherings while 58% stated that it was their first time. Another 28% of those taking part in the Gathering did not answer this question (see Figure 5).

Figure 5: Attendance at Previous Gatherings

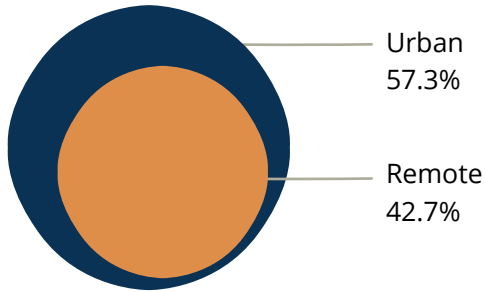


URBAN VERSUS REMOTE GEOGRAPHIES FOR PARTICIPANTS

Most of those answering the evaluation survey said they live in an urban or semi-urban area (57.3%, n=522). Another 42.7% (n=389) of survey respondents live away from a city or town, or in a community without year-round road access (see Figure 6).



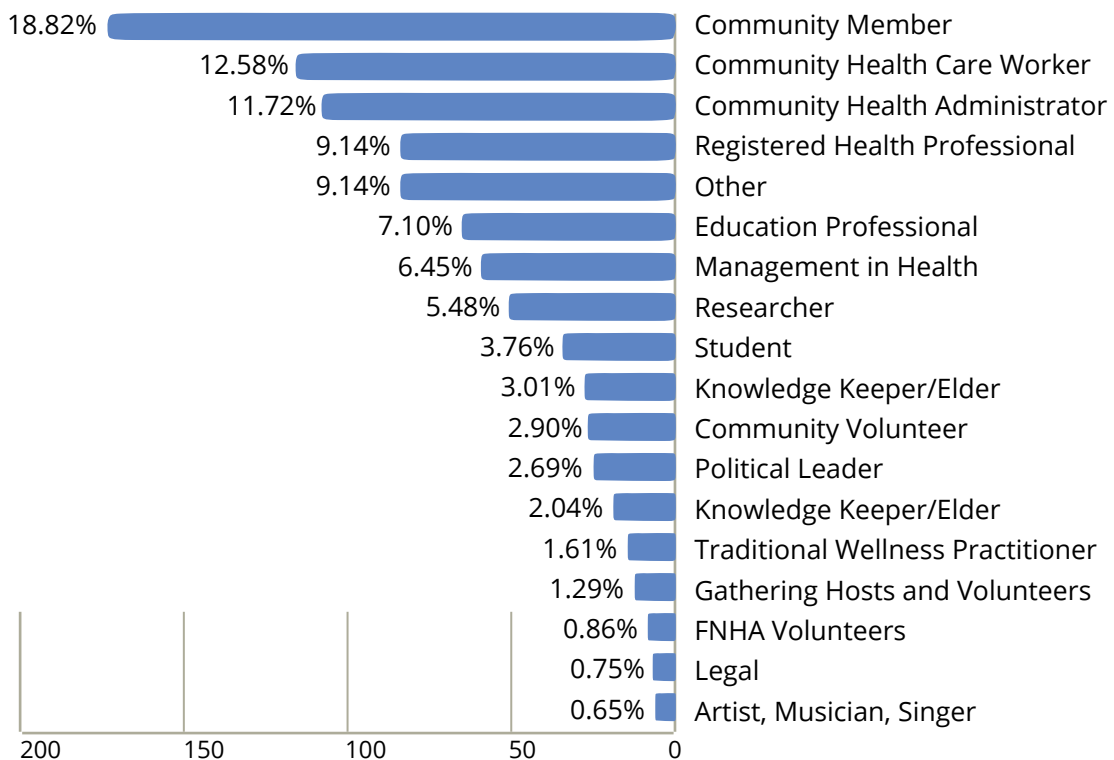
Figure 6: Where Participants Live



PROFESSIONAL STATUS OR ROLES OF PARTICIPANTS

Participants were asked to identify their professional status or role as attendees at the Gathering. The most common answers were community member, community health care worker, community health administrator, registered health professional, other and education professional (see Figure 7).

Figure 7: Gathering Participant Roles



DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION

The Gathering aimed to create an inclusive and welcoming environment for all participants. Quantitative and qualitative measures from the one-on-one conversations, storytelling sessions and the survey data all reveal that the Gathering was effective at creating an inclusive environment that fostered diversity and met the needs of participants. Participants of various ages, genders and countries of origin felt included and welcome at the Gathering.

While the Gathering was held in English, participants could hear a variety of Indigenous languages spoken during the event.

Participants shared their appreciation of the Indigenous diversity and cultural sharing that was present. A very small percentage of survey respondents and interviewees (n=16) observed they felt the Gathering had a pan-Indigenous approach. They suggested it would be beneficial to see more Métis and Inuit content and peoples represented.

Participants also shared their interest in developing relationships with Indigenous peoples and communities from South America, other parts of the United States and beyond.

Participants described the Two-Spirit event as a true celebration of the 2SLGBTQQIA+ community and an opportunity for broader learnings. This was an important group to highlight given 2SLGBTQQIA+ individuals represented less than 2% of the Gathering's participants. Participants were also encouraged by the level of focused attention at the Gathering for youth, even though they accounted for only 7% of those taking part. Gathering organizers ensured that there were meeting spaces, resources and dedicated evaluation sessions for youth and Elders. While higher in percentage terms at 19% (n=709), people identifying as male were underrepresented as Gathering participants.



PARTICIPANTS DESCRIBED THE TWO-SPIRIT EVENT AS A TRUE CELEBRATION OF THE 2SLGBTQIA+ COMMUNITY AND AN OPPORTUNITY FOR BROADER LEARNINGS.



EVENT SOFTWARE

The CVENT application was accessible during check-in through a shared QR code and/or by using the QR code posted around the venue. While the CVENT application offered access to the online agendas, managed sign-in and event registration, helped to reduce single-use paper and litter, and lessened the strain on organizers by what it automated, it was not necessarily intuitive or user-friendly. Many participants were visibly frustrated with the application and found it did not include sufficient information. As noted earlier, some participants also said they would have preferred paper copies for managing the agenda. Others said that their access code never came, thus delaying access to sessions and workshops.

When faced with such issues, participants noted that staff and volunteers, including evaluators, were easy to find, helpful and supportive.

REGISTRATION

Close to 4,000 attendees used the FNHA's website, largely successfully, to prepare for the Gathering. Twenty-four percent of the registrations were received by April 30 and the majority (61.4%) were received from July 1 to September 15, 2023. In the evaluation survey and one-on-one conversations, participants described the online registration process on the HOSW website as both accessible and easy to use.

Most participants – including organizers and staff, vendors, exhibitors and presenters – said there was a need for improved planning around check-in day logistics. Long lines, the lack of a line exclusively for Elders and extended wait times made for a challenging first day.

While volunteers, staff and organizers responded quickly and compassionately to those in need, the sheer size and scope of the event (as much as the number of people in attendance) limited organizers' ability to quickly improve the situation. The venue was only available to the hosts to set up the registration booths on the morning of the first day of the Gathering. Once participants were informed that they could come back and register later, the line-ups were reduced.



VENUE

The Vancouver Convention Centre offered a range of functional spaces and the venue itself played a large role in participants' positive experiences at the Gathering, with many noting that the venue encouraged spiritual and cultural connections and relationship-building. Set against the scenic backdrop of Coal Harbour, the location was widely praised for its beautiful and serene environment. The venue was universally admired, with participants noting that it was aesthetically appealing, fostering a sense of place, contemplation and connection. Many commented that the venue itself was one of the highlights of the Gathering. The many doors to the exterior offered ready access to outdoor spaces that overlooked the water and the mountains beyond. These outdoor spaces were often used by Gathering participants to gather, connect and share or conduct healing ceremonies (e.g., smudging).

WHAT WE HEARD

"I enjoyed the feeling of solidarity while at the Gathering and felt the venue with 'our people' was a brief sanctuary for us while visiting Vancouver. Felt safe, comfortable amongst like-minded gatherers, thank you."

"Been wonderful to share space with like-minded people."

The "Gathering Space" was a central location for informal and spontaneous connections, and was often a lively spot full of song, drumming and dance. At other times, during the concurrent sessions or keynotes, the Gathering Space was quiet and served as a place of calm contemplation and conversation.

Participants said that more seating was needed to comfortably accommodate the number of guests and that mobility aids like wheelchairs, along with better signage and maps to help people navigate the venue, would have been helpful. Volunteers, staff and even evaluators routinely found themselves helping others find their way around the venue.

Participants also noted that more could have been done to support those facing dietary restrictions or people with mobility and sensory challenges, with consideration for the needs of individuals who are deaf or hard of hearing. The variety of sign languages used across the globe, however, made it complex to provide interpretive services. Closed captioning was arranged for the main sessions, but was unavailable for the concurrent workshops and presentations.



ACTIVITIES AND SESSIONS

The 140 presenters and speakers were showcased throughout the venue. About 79% of survey respondents stated they were able to connect with speakers and presenters during the sessions, breaks and/or structured activities. Speakers and presenters told evaluators in the one-on-one conversations that they enjoyed being able to connect with the participants, but often wished there was more time to explore their topics, address questions and engage with participants at the end of their sessions.

The keynotes covered topics related to health and wellness, strength and resilience, health innovation and transformation, and health governance and leadership. These topics tied back into the streams and themes of the Gathering. Participants made particular note⁵ of how the speakers Anthony Johnson and Dr. James Makokis (Canada), Sue-Ann Hunter (Australia), Chelsey Luger and Anthony Thosh Collins⁶ (continental United States) and Dr. Sheri-Ann Daniels (Hawaii) were excellent at engaging participants and discussing Indigenous resiliency and healing.

Organized activities, workshops and sessions kept participants engaged, excited and learning throughout the Gathering. Of the 58 concurrent sessions, the most attended were *Te Whare Tapa Whare, Māori Model of Health* and *Maramataka Māori (Environmental Calendars)*. Interestingly both were connected to the theme of *Mental Health, Healing, and Wellness*. In the one-on-one conversations, participants shared that the Gathering made them feel they were not alone in their health journey, provided resources for their communities, and promoted healing on a spiritual and an emotional level.

⁵Based on one-on-one interviews and online survey results conducted by the evaluators.

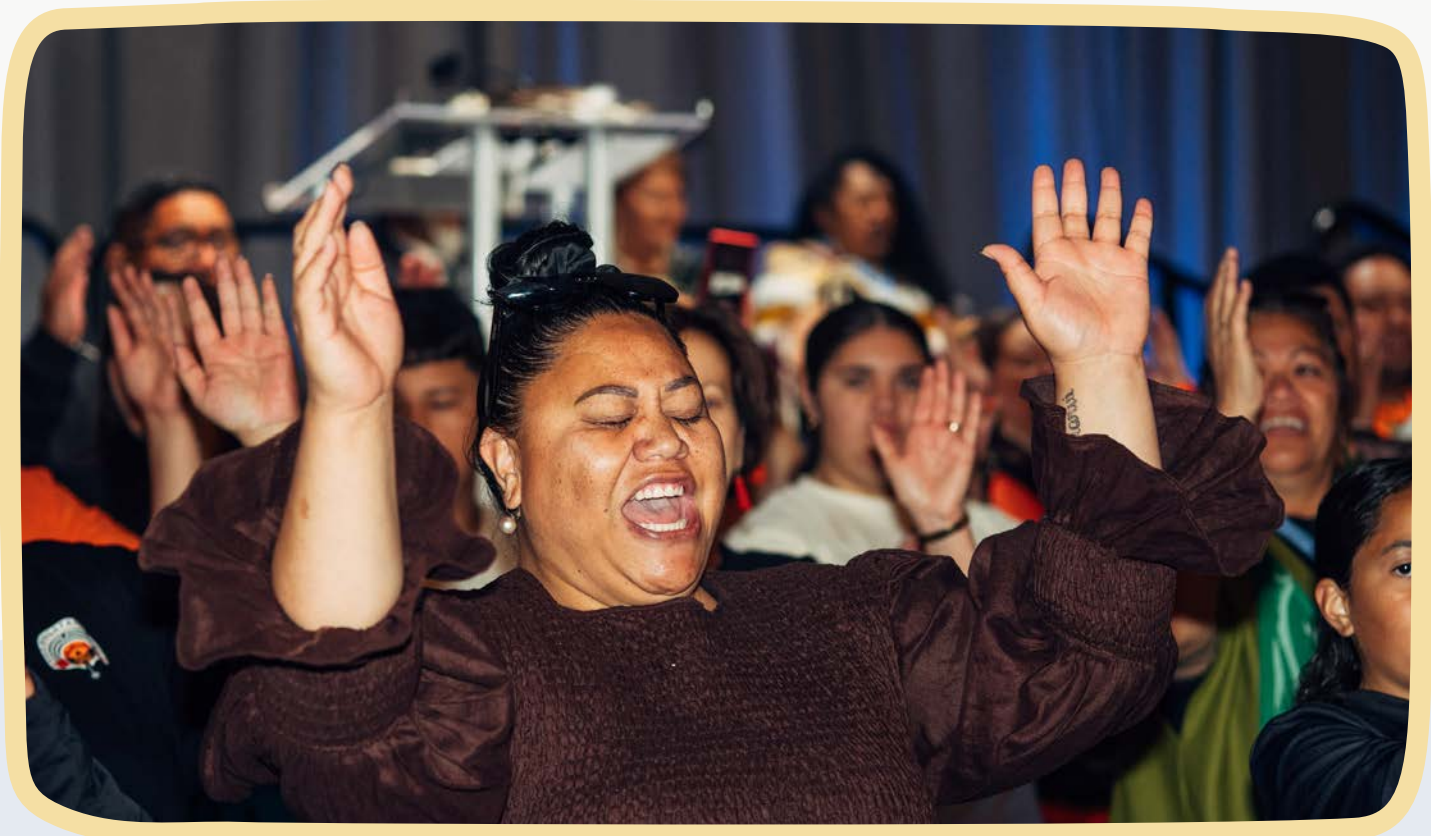
⁶The authors of the *Seven Circles: Indigenous Teachings for Living Well*.

In the surveys and one-on-one conversations, participants noted that the themes they felt most engaged by were *Healing, Culture and Wellness, Indigenous Resiliency, and Mental Health and Wellness*. These themes were explored in youth and Elders sessions, Māori plenary speakers/ sessions, and sexuality and wellness sessions.

Gathering participants also described the impact of the many ceremonies, including the Parade of Nations, the pipe ceremony and the Passing of the Canoe. In the surveys and one-on-one conversations, Gathering participants described how these ceremonies supported the development of relationships that were an integral part of the participants' experience. The Parade of Nations provided participants with the opportunity to express their individual Indigeneity as well as connect cross-culturally.

Participants were also offered the chance to take part in cultural and nightly activities or sessions that included a pipe ceremony, a special dinner event, film nights, the Parade of Nations, a weaving night, plant medicine-making and a three host Nations workshop.

In one-on-one conversations, participants recommended including facilitated networking or relationship-building sessions, and expanding cultural activities and events outside of evening hours. A number of participants reflected on the lack of land-based activities. The connection to lands and waters is a vital component of most Indigenous identities and a key part of healing. Participants and organizers both emphasized the importance of ensuring land-based opportunities at the next gathering. In addition, participants said they are interested in more opportunities to be part of healing activities and cultural workshops such as weaving and medicine-making.



CULTURAL SUPPORTS

One of the most appreciated aspects of the Gathering was the availability of cultural support persons. Because some of the content was emotionally, mentally or spiritually triggering, organizers ensured that cultural support persons were available during sessions, workshops and events. In the one-on-one conversations, participants shared their appreciation for having timely access to cultural supports. The evaluators observed the popularity of these activities and regularly noted the appreciation for the level of care the organizers and hosts demonstrated in providing these opportunities.

“Loved the cultures (healing sessions, cedar, smudging), and just being able to sit with anyone and strike up an awesome conversation. Was an overwhelmingly positive experience.”

FOOD

Participants welcomed the food that was available on site. There was some confusion on the first day over whether meals were provided, but this was promptly addressed. Some participants suggested that easier access to water stations or bottled water would be helpful.

Both participants and the evaluators observed the need for a more inclusive and culturally appropriate selection of food options. Participants and evaluators noted the importance of accommodating dietary restrictions and preferences such as for those with gluten intolerance or diabetes, as well as to traditional and healthy food choices. These enhancements would cater to the diverse nutritional requirements and cultural backgrounds of the participants.

The Gala Dinner, with its menu highlighting traditional First Nations foods, was a noted success.





VENDORS AND EXHIBITORS

Vendors, exhibitors and presenters played an important role in creating a meaningful and fulfilling experience for Gathering participants.

The vendors and exhibitors contributed to the success of the Gathering by sharing their traditional skills, culture and knowledge. Participants often reflected their delight with the vendor and exhibitor hall. They spoke about the vibrant space and appreciation for purchasing from and interacting with Indigenous artisans. Many participants shared that the resources offered by exhibitors were relevant and meaningful to their position in their organization or community, and they were looking forward to returning home to pass these resources and their learning on to others. Those participants who attended the Gathering in a professional role noted the resources were an unexpected but useful and welcome aspect of the Gathering.

Vendors and exhibitors noted that it would have been helpful to have access to the venue ahead of time to set up. Challenges with check-in queues and crowds on the first day made it difficult for vendors to set up their booths and display their inventory. As well, the lock-up of the venue that occurred after each day's events delayed access for vendors the next morning when trying to access their booths.

REFLECTIONS ON OUTCOMES

The HOSW Gathering was created to showcase transformation in Indigenous health, healing and resiliency. Some of the aims of the Gathering included the sharing and transfer of knowledge; the opportunity to learn and work together across Indigenous communities and leaders; the ability to demonstrate that Indigenous futures are intimately linked to their language, culture and practices; and the opportunity to celebrate global Indigenous cultures.

The Gathering successfully provided participants with a transformative experience and opportunities for cultural exchange, sharing, connection and relationship-building. Organizers, staff, volunteers, presenters, vendors and sponsors all shared their overwhelmingly positive experience with new cultural learnings, innovative health care practices, and an expanded sense of Indigenous health, healing and wellness. These positive outcomes were related to participants' ability to access healing sessions, take part in cultural activities, and make spontaneous cultural and intellectual connections. The venue space and

event location, Gathering agenda, many cultural activities and celebrations, and overall sense of belonging and cultural care contributed toward feelings of connection with other participants, Gathering organizers, the HOSW movement and the Covenant. These and other reflections on the outcomes of the Gathering are presented in more detail on the following page.



EXPERIENCE-DRIVEN OPPORTUNITIES AND IMPACTS

In the survey, one-on-one conversations and storytelling sessions, participants overwhelmingly described their experience of the Gathering as “once in a lifetime,” “unbelievable” and “powerful.” They stated that the Gathering offered them dedicated opportunities for spiritual, cultural and emotional connection, cultural sharing and learning, connection to the broader Indigenous community and worldviews, and a celebration of Indigenous joy. Participants reflected that the experience was empowering and uplifting, offering them time to renew and heal their spirits surrounded by positive energy, Indigenous pride and cultural diversity. Participants further noted the unexpected experience of feeling connected to Indigenous peoples from other parts of the world, and how the solidarity fostered feelings of home, belonging and pride. In the one-on-one conversations and storytelling circles, participants expressed their intention to foster the connections and relationships they developed at the Gathering over the long term.



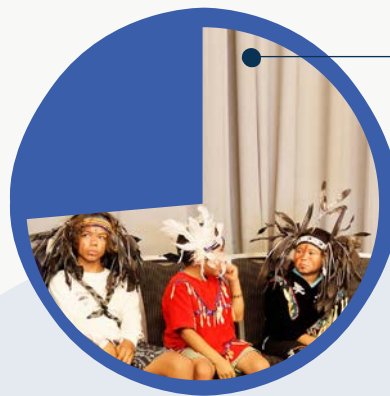
90.1%
of survey respondents stated they connected with and learned from others at the Gathering



79.9%
of survey respondents stated they participated in cultural sharing and knowledge exchange



78.4%
of survey respondents stated they made connections and developed relationships



73.7%
of survey respondents stated they connected with Elders and youth at the Gathering

LEARNINGS AND KNOWLEDGE SHARING

The Gathering provided participants with multiple formal and informal learning and knowledge-sharing opportunities.

Among the survey respondents, 80% stated that they would use their learnings from the Gathering in their career, within their community and for their own personal development. Participants further shared that the activities, sessions, workshops and cultural opportunities allowed them to learn, share and grow as individuals and members of the broader Indigenous community.



87.5%

of survey respondents agreed or strongly agreed they learned and explored *Indigenous Resiliency*



85.1%

of survey respondents agreed or strongly agreed they learned and explored *Healing Culture, and Wellness*



84.5%

of survey respondents agreed or strongly agreed they learned and explored *Mental Health and Wellness*

WHAT WE HEARD

90% of survey respondents would attend future gatherings.

"I learned and shared traditional Indigenous knowledge."

"I became familiar with the Covenant."

"I enjoyed learning about Indigenous resiliency."

"So excited to see cohesiveness and collectiveness to heal and strengthen the whole."

"I connected with and learned from others."

Participants shared on the Sharpie Wall on how far Indigenous peoples have come leading up to this Gathering, what learnings and connections support the journey of healing, and how the healing journey can continue to grow.

HOW FAR HAVE WE COME?

"We have come a long way, but the journey must continue."

WHAT LEARNINGS AND CONNECTIONS HAVE YOU GATHERED HERE THAT WILL SUPPORT THIS HEALING JOURNEY?

"For enough to know there is more to this journey."

"We are just starting to wake up to listen and do what our ancestors left behind."

"That we are all equal and together we are stronger."

"Understanding that we are learning and building the healing foundation."

"Cultural connections made and will continue to learn and inspire me for a long time."

"Holistic approach with a First Nations lens."

HOW CAN THE HEALING JOURNEY CONTINUE TO GROW?

"Getting the word out to make a difference."

"General assembly, community meetings."

"Accept that we were never powerless, colonization tried to take this from us."

*We are the land. We are the authentic original peoples,
we are co-created with God, now is our time. We will lead in the healing of the world."*

"Intergenerational inclusion. All genders. Keep doing what works."

"Everything begins within, it starts with you."

"We are the roots, so we need to plant ourselves to the earth through prayer."



"Communication between cultures is so valuable. There are common threads across all Indigenous peoples. Seeing the preservation of language among communities is heart-warming. Feels good to see interest as part of healing. Need this understanding developed."

"I learned so much, what's happening in our area is not unique, it is happening everywhere, and everyone is working toward the same positive outcome."

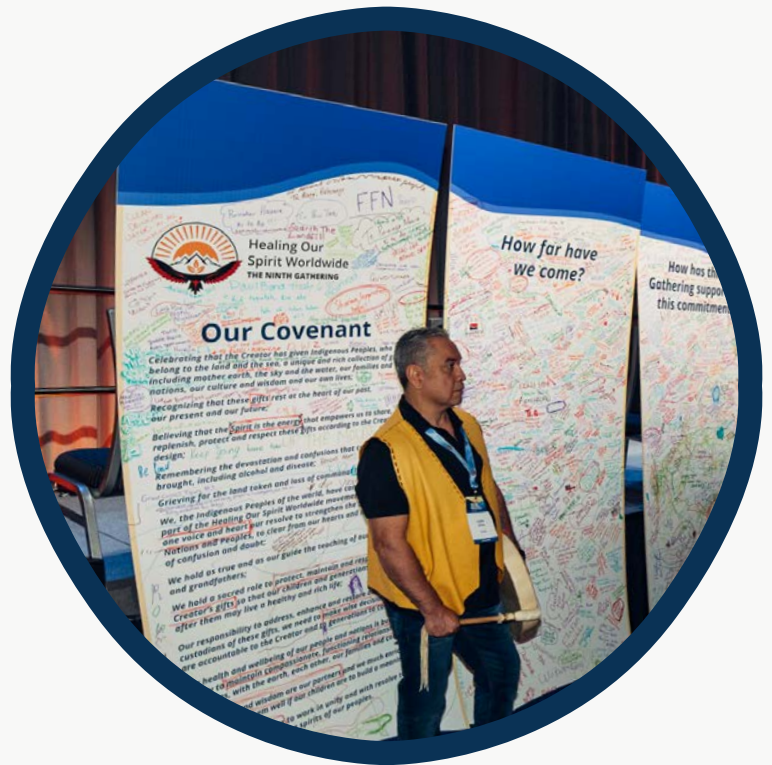
"It was very powerful with all our peoples sharing culture, language, energy and identity. I believe Creator and our ancestors were present and ensured we felt their presence."

"This was such a spiritual, healing Gathering. I learned so much to bring back to the community to help and support each and every one of them."

"This Gathering has changed the way I think, the way I feel and reignited my passion for reindigenizing myself, my family, my community and my Nation."

THE COVENANT AND THE HOSW MOVEMENT

The Covenant is the core guiding philosophy behind the Gathering events and the HOSW movement. One-on-one conversations, post-Gathering focus groups, survey results and Sharpie wall observations indicated that many participants were not fully aware of the Covenant and its purpose. However, once they were made aware of the Covenant, participants largely supported its content and direction. Close to two-thirds (64%) of survey respondents reported that they deepened their understanding of the Covenant during the Gathering. Participants – including organizers, staff and volunteers – expressed their interest in learning more about the Covenant and the HOSW movement.



On the Sharpie wall, participants shared how the Gathering supported the commitments set out in the Covenant. Their contributions included:

"Sharing and learning from each other."

"We can learn new skills and take them home to share with our people."

"Nurturing the purpose: the Elders passing on and educating the youth with purpose."

Some participants suggested to evaluators that rather than focusing on engaging participants in the Covenant, it may be more useful to focus on the intrinsic value of the event around the world, shifting to the healing and learnings this can bring.

Considerations for the Future

Planning the Gathering was a complex endeavour, requiring oversight of format, logistics and a wide array of participants from diverse backgrounds, including age groups, nationalities, ethnicities, genders, sexual identities and orientations, and Indigenous cultures and communities from around the world. The experiences of the Gathering highlight the importance of:

- Having well-established governance and organizational structures with clear accountabilities and dedicated, knowledgeable staffing;
- A planning timeline and approach that can address the complexity of a large international event (e.g., procurement, staffing, technology solutions, fundraising, handling of travel and accommodation and more);
- Adequate training and support for staff and volunteers, with back-ups for key positions;
- Sustained communications with those taking part in the Gathering and broader outreach to Indigenous peoples outside of North America;
- Selecting a venue that supports connection, cultural sharing and accessibility;
- Registration and abstract management software programs that are easy for organizers and participants to use;
- Dedicated efforts and supports for youth, Elders and 2SLGBTQIA+ individuals in concert with those with mobility, physical, mental health, cultural and linguistic needs;
- Addressing financial barriers to participation;
- Offering event materials in various forms;
- Ensuring that allowances are made to foster connections among all participants (including speakers, organizers and vendors) with the HOSW movement; and
- Finding opportunities to gain knowledge of Indigenous culture in its many forms, including through land-based experiences.

These reflections and learnings are intended to inform and inspire future hosts to build upon the Gathering and further transform the HOSW movement.

Appendix A: Planning and Delivery Structures and Roles

The planning of the Gathering was supported by eight Working Groups. Based on feedback, it would be useful to add another two working groups or roles for future events of this magnitude: Technology and Stage Management. The mandate and responsibilities of the Gathering Working Groups are outlined below.

EVENT MANAGEMENT WORKING GROUP

- Participant welcome packages
- Oversight of registration
- Special guests, IICHOSW and guest country logistics
- Selection, training and oversight of volunteers
- On-site assistance
- Oversight of event management contract
- Overview of audiovisual and sound system contract
- Volunteers

FINANCE AND PROCUREMENT WORKING GROUP

- Sponsorships
- Budget
- Contract and procurement management

PROGRAM MANAGEMENT WORKING GROUP

- Concurrent, plenary, digital and poster presentations processes
- Confirming keynote and plenary speakers
- Program development

PROTOCOLS AND CEREMONY WORKING GROUP

- Engagement of local First Nations
- Opening ceremony logistics
- Closing ceremony logistics
- Development of overall protocols (opening each day, etc.)

EVALUATION AND REPORTING WORKING GROUP

- Developing evaluation plan and data collection tools
- Supporting evaluation contractors and approving final evaluation report

SPACE MANAGEMENT WORKING GROUP

- Gathering space logistics
- Other rooms support and logistics (staff, wellness and health support rooms)

SPECIAL TRACKS AND STREAMS WORKING GROUP

- Development and implementation of youth-focused content and workshops
- Supporting a Youth Task Group made up of First Nations youth to guide programming and events for youth at the event
- Development and implementation of Elder-focused content and workshops
- Supporting an Elder Task Group made up of First Nations Elders to guide programming and events for Elders at the event
- Planning and hosting evening activities and events

COMMUNICATIONS AND MARKETING WORKING GROUP

- Developing communication and marketing plans and policies
- Logo(s) development
- Website, social media and collateral supports
- Onsite support



Additional support was put in place in the form of a contracted project management consultant, a planner, technology consultants (audio and visual services), catering services and a communications consultant.

The project management contractor (project manager) was secured from January 2022 until December 2023 on a part-time basis with an increase in hours in 2023 leading up to the event. Their main role was to steer the event and work with the various committees. A full-time project planner (planning coordinator) joined the team in the six months leading up to the Gathering. Their principal role was to support the project manager.

The technology consultants were hired through the Vancouver Convention Centre and handled the audiovisual equipment for session rooms and ballrooms, as well as coordinating the set-up and takedown of each ballroom.

The catering company was also contracted through the Vancouver Convention Centre and its in-house kitchen operations. The catering staff supplied coffee, snacks, lunch and beverages in the mornings and afternoons of the event. They also managed the set-up and take-down of the lunchroom and the rest of the venue.

The communication consultants were hired to help with registration leading up to the event (May to September 2023) and were on site during the Gathering. Two staff were hired on a full-time basis to assist with setting up the registration portal, registration requests, changes, reimbursements and on-site check in.

Added to this were the 32 lead organizers and staff and 230 HOSW volunteers who answered questions and helped participants register for sessions and activities and make their way around the venue.



Appendix B: Reflection and Learning Approaches

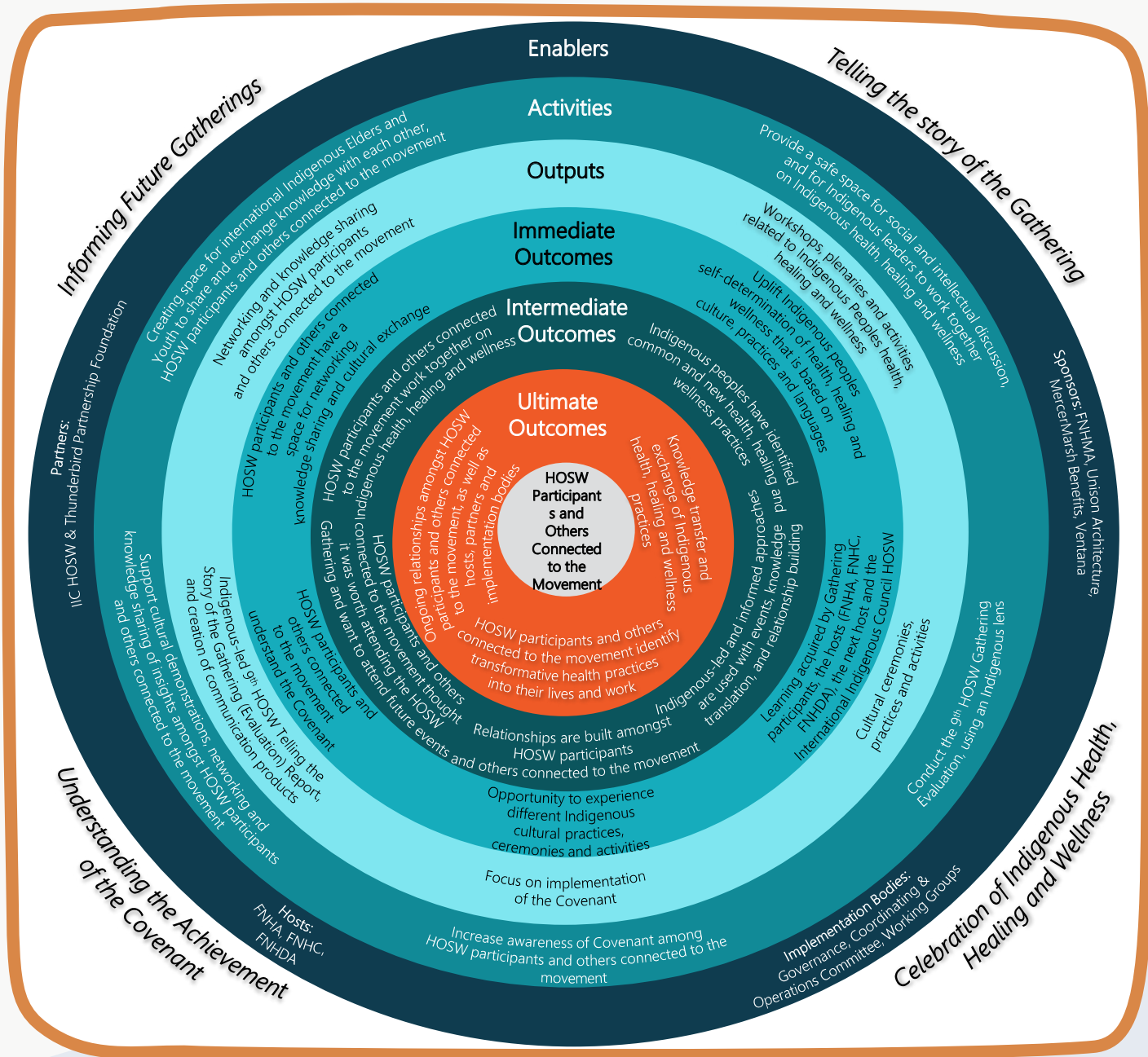
The FNHA engaged professional services firm MNP to conduct the evaluation of the HOSW, a mandatory part of the agreement between the FNHA as host of the event and the IICHOSW. In keeping with an Indigenous lens, the evaluation was founded on collaboration, participant storytelling, relationship building, meaningful engagement and cultural awareness.

EVALUATION PLANNING

The primary aims of the evaluation were to share the story of the planning and delivery of the Gathering from the points of view of leadership, staff and participants; understand the experiences, successes, challenges and wise practices of implementing the Gathering to inform future hosts and the FNHA; report on the learnings across Gathering presentations and events; help show the intended and unintended outcomes of the Gathering; and document the expectations and experiences of those who took part.

A “Reflection and Relationship Framework” was developed to address these goals, which included an illustration of the guiding values for the evaluation along with the enablers, activities, outputs and desired outcomes of the Gathering.





SCOPE AND METHODS OF THE EVALUATION

The related tools and the connections made throughout the evaluation are illustrated below.

REGISTRATION DATA



- Demographic details of 3,726 participants
- FNHA registration and survey data

1:1 CONVERSATIONS



- 200 one-on-one conversations, either in-person or virtually, with participants and other informants

DOCUMENT REVIEW



- Reviewed meeting minutes, agendas, the evaluation framework, business plans and other past reports

DIGITAL AND ILLUSTRATIVE STORIES



- Observations of the 360 Video, Interactive Sharpie Wall, Photo Booth and Video Booth

COMMUNICATION ANALYTICS



- Reviewed FNHA's social media analytics and contents (Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter, Instagram)
- 20 datasets and stories were used

IN-GATHERING OBSERVATIONS



- Observed the Gathering throughout the five days of the event
- 34 data sheets were completed

FOCUS GROUPS



- Sit downs, either in-person or virtually, with partners and other informants
- Two sessions were completed (3 to 4 people in each)

STORYTELLING SESSIONS



- In person sessions with youth and Elders, delivered in a circle with an open and safe environment
- Two sessions were completed (6 people in each)

OVERALL GATHERING SURVEY



- An online survey available through the CVENT application or through a QR code for all participants to complete through the event
- 955 surveys were analyzed

A five-person evaluation team was situated at a booth in the vendor and exhibitor area of the Gathering from September 10 to 15, 2023. The booth location was visible and positioned to encourage participants to interact with the team. The Gathering Space was also close by, making the booth an obvious location for evaluators to conduct one-on-one conversations, assist with the surveys and arrange for storytelling sessions with Gathering participants. In addition to the use of the Gathering Space, the evaluators set up a mini-conversation area at the booth.



The storytelling sessions were organized to promote sharing, connection and equity between participants and the evaluators. As well, the one-on-one conversations were carried out in a manner that honoured the individual experiences and perspectives of each participant. These conversations were structured to be more reflective and personal, allowing for a deeper exploration of thoughts and insights. This approach not only supported a more meaningful dialogue but also respected the cultural significance of oral traditions in Indigenous communities. The conversations were held with evaluators and Gathering volunteers, with each lasting between 15 and 30 minutes. Elders enjoyed the opportunity to personally touch base with the evaluation team and participate in the storytelling sessions. Many Elders popped by on multiple occasions throughout the Gathering to update the evaluators and check in with the team.

The Gathering survey was programmed using Survey Sparrow and made available for participants through the event management software CVENT. The survey was uploaded and accessible to all within the application by Wednesday, September 13 and remained open until after the Gathering was completed. Roughly 27% (n=955) of participants answered survey questions. To make the experience as easy as possible, the survey was designed to take around seven minutes to complete. Some participants, such as Elders, preferred to use paper copies of the survey, so the evaluation team helped them with this. This facilitated trust in the process and with the evaluation team, which often then led to one-on-one conversations.

Passersby were also offered a gift, a “Yeti” mug, for taking part in one of the evaluation methods. Most of those interviewed found the process to be effective, personable and valuable.



In the end, the following sources of knowledge were engaged by this evaluation:

- Gathering hosts (FNHA, FNHC, FNHDA)
- Implementation Bodies (Governance, Coordination and Operations Committee)
- Gathering partners (IIC HOSW, Thunderbird Partnership Foundation)
- Gathering sponsors
- Gathering leads and volunteers
- Gathering panelists and presenters
- Gathering exhibitors and vendors
- Gathering participants

LIMITS OF THE EVALUATION

MNP was engaged in July 2023 to support the evaluation activities for the Gathering. The overall availability of organizers in the pre- and post-event periods, and the compressed planning and preparation window, resulted in some constraints to MNP's ability to offer reflections on the planning theme.

Although participant observation was helpful for giving context to the evaluation, the size and scope of the Gathering, in addition to the popularity of the one-on-one conversations, meant that evaluators were also limited in their ability to be present for all activities and sessions. Further, the participants themselves were also so engaged in the Gathering agenda and activities that sharing their thoughts for the evaluation was often not a priority. Attendance at the sharing circles was not as robust as hoped for.

Technology is a valuable evaluation tool, offering the opportunity to reach a large audience over an event the size and scope of the Gathering. Many (955) participants used the online survey application. Early in the Gathering, however, a link related to a survey of the CVENT application was provided instead of a link to the evaluation survey. It took 36 hours to remove the link to the wrong survey and replace it with the proper link. This barrier in communication between the evaluators, CVENT, technology and project managers, as well as competing priorities for organizers delayed resolution of this issue.

Finally, there were limits with the demographic data obtained through the survey and the FNHA registration process. As it was optional for respondents to include demographic information, the full picture of participants' demographic details are unknown. This limits the completeness of the evaluation findings related to age, gender and country of origin, among other aspects of interest.





Report prepared by: MNP

