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# The Indigenous Reclamation Framework: The Protocol of Letting Communities Lead

*Pillar's Indigenous Reclamation practice is structured as an open proposal. Indigenous-led organizations decide what gets built; Pillar provides infrastructure capacity in stewardship. This piece teaches the protocol as a transferable model for foundations, ministries, and multilaterals.*

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*Pillar's Indigenous Reclamation practice is structured as an open proposal: Indigenous-led organizations decide what gets built, on what timeline, with what visibility, and Pillar provides infrastructure capacity in stewardship. This piece documents that protocol as a transferable model any foundation, ministry, or multilateral can adopt.*

## The thesis

- Why protocol design — who decides what, in what order — matters more than project scope when engaging Indigenous-led organizations
- The five operating commitments that make up The Protocol of Letting Communities Lead
- What 'open proposal' and 'infrastructure in stewardship' mean in concrete operational terms
- How foundations and ministries can adapt this protocol to their own grantmaking and program architecture
- What this protocol explicitly is not — and why distinguishing it from co-design or participatory research matters

## 01 — The framework: The Protocol of Letting

# Communities Lead

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## The Protocol of Letting Communities Lead

The protocol is a sequence of explicit operating commitments. It is structured so that the order of the steps — and the question of who holds which decision — is documented rather than improvised. Each pillar below is a transferable commitment that any foundation, ministry, or infrastructure partner can adopt.

1

### **Outcomes are defined by the Indigenous-led organization**

Before scope, before budget, before timeline, the Indigenous organization names the outcome it wants. Pillar does not arrive with a proposed project. The proposal space is open: the Indigenous organization can define a language revitalization site, a sovereignty documentation archive, a youth media platform, or no project at all. Pillar's role is to make infrastructure capacity available to whatever outcome is named.

2

### **Infrastructure is held in stewardship, not activated by default**

Pillar holds an inventory of Indigenous-language-relevant .com domains. None of these are developed, listed publicly, or monetized without Indigenous-led partnership and explicit written consent. The default state of the inventory is protection. Activation requires direction from the Indigenous organization, not a Pillar product decision.

3

### **Naming and visibility require explicit written consent**

No partner is named in Pillar communications, case studies, or fundraising materials without written consent specific to the use. Consent is granular (it can apply to one channel and not another) and revocable at any stage. The default for partnerships under this protocol is non-attribution; visibility is a choice the Indigenous organization makes when and if it serves the work.

4

### Engagement starts with the Indigenous organization, not the intermediary

The first call in any new engagement routes to the Indigenous-led organization — not to Pillar, and not to the funder. [Pillar Institute \(/institute/\)](#) acts as introducer and facilitator only. This sequencing matters: it sets the operating expectation that the Indigenous organization holds the lead role from the first moment of the relationship, not after a discovery phase controlled by someone else.

5

### Funders underwrite the work, not the lead role

Foundations, ministries, and multilaterals underwriting work under this protocol fund the Indigenous organization to lead. Infrastructure partners (Pillar, technical hosts, narrative architects, legal counsel) are funded as resources the Indigenous organization draws on. The prime contract sits with the Indigenous lead. This is a deliberate inversion of the standard model and is the single most important structural commitment in the protocol.

## 02 — The data.

# 5,000+

Indigenous languages spoken globally today

UNESCO

# 476M+

Indigenous peoples worldwide, approximately 6% of the global population

WORLD BANK

# 40%+

Indigenous languages projected endangered by 2100

UNESCO ATLAS OF ENDANGERED LANGUAGES

# 90%+

Indigenous languages lacking significant digital presence

UNESCO / ITU JOINT REPORTING ON DIGITAL LANGUAGE INCLUSION

&lt;1%

Share of global philanthropic funding reaching Indigenous-led organizations

BRIDGESPAN, 2021

2022–2032

UN International Decade of Indigenous Languages

UNESCO / UN GENERAL ASSEMBLY  
RESOLUTION A/RES/74/135

## Why the protocol matters before the project

For most of the digital era, the standard pattern for engaging Indigenous communities has run in one direction. An outside organization identifies a 'gap' (an undigitized language, an underrepresented narrative, an absent web presence), designs a solution, secures funding, and arrives with a proposal. Even when intentions are careful, the structure is extractive: the outside organization holds the timeline, the budget, the platform decisions, and the publication rights. Indigenous leadership becomes consultative rather than directive.

Pillar's Indigenous Reclamation practice was built to invert that structure at the protocol level — before any project, any domain, any conversation about scope. The premise is that [digital sovereignty \(/authority/\)](#) for Indigenous communities cannot be retrofitted onto a non-Indigenous-led process. It has to be designed in. That means the protocol governs everything: who initiates the call, who defines the outcomes, who holds the infrastructure, and who has consent rights over visibility. The Protocol of Letting Communities Lead is the documented version of that operating commitment, and it is offered here as a transferable model — not as Pillar's proprietary methodology, but as a baseline that any foundation, ministry, or multilateral can adapt.

## What 'open proposal' means in practice

The phrase 'open proposal' is doing specific work in the Pillar protocol. It does not mean Pillar publishes a list of projects and invites Indigenous organizations to apply. That would still center Pillar as gatekeeper. Instead, it means the proposal space itself is open: Indigenous-led organizations define the outcome they want, on the timeline they want, with the partners they want. Pillar's role is to make its infrastructure capacity — domain inventory, technical stewardship, AI Labs research, narrative architecture — available as a resource the Indigenous organization can draw on, redirect, or decline.

This has concrete operational consequences. Pillar holds an inventory of Indigenous-language-relevant .com domains in stewardship. None of these domains will be developed, monetized, or publicly associated with a community without explicit Indigenous-led partnership and written consent. The inventory is not a portfolio to be activated; it is held in trust against the day an Indigenous organization decides — on its own terms — that the domain serves its work. Foundations and ministries underwriting this kind of arrangement need to understand that they are funding patience and stewardship as much as activity. The deliverable is not always a launched site this fiscal year. Sometimes the deliverable is that the domain remains protected and available.

## How foundations and ministries can use this model

**T**he protocol is designed to be portable. A foundation engaging Indigenous-led grantees can adopt the same sequencing: introduction call routes to the Indigenous organization first, not to the intermediary. Outcome definition happens before budget shaping, not after. Infrastructure partners (technical, narrative, legal) are vetted by the Indigenous organization, not assigned to it. Naming, attribution, and case-study rights are governed by written consent that can be revoked at any stage.

Multilaterals operating under the UN Decade of Indigenous Languages (2022-2032) have a particular opening here. The Decade's framing explicitly centers Indigenous-led action, but the funding architecture often still defaults to non-Indigenous lead organizations holding the prime contract. The Protocol of Letting Communities Lead offers a structural template for shifting that — one where Indigenous organizations hold the lead role, and infrastructure capacity (including [Pillar Institute \(/institute/\)](#)'s introducer/facilitator function) sits underneath that lead, not in front of it.

## What this protocol explicitly is not

**I**t is important to be precise about the boundaries. The Protocol of Letting Communities Lead is not a consultation framework, a co-design methodology, or a participatory research model. Those frameworks all assume the non-Indigenous organization retains decision authority and invites Indigenous input into a process it controls. The protocol described here transfers decision authority. The Indigenous organization decides whether work happens, what work happens, on what timeline, with what visibility, and with what partners.

It is also not a guarantee of speed or scale. Working this way is slower than the standard model in early phases, because trust, consent architecture, and outcome definition are built before delivery work begins. Foundations and ministries used to twelve-month grant cycles with quarterly deliverables need to budget differently — for multi-year relationships, for periods of explicit pause, and for outcomes that may not be publicly attributable. The trade-off is durability. Work built under this protocol is owned, governed, and led by the community it serves, which is the only definition of digital sovereignty that survives a change of vendor, funder, or government.

## 03 — Apply this to your foundation, ministry, or multilateral

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**O**perational steps for adapting the protocol to your own Indigenous-community engagements. Each item is a discrete commitment your organization can adopt independently — they compound, but the first one alone changes the relationship.

1. Route the first call to the Indigenous-led organization, not to an intermediary or infrastructure partner. The sequencing signals who holds the lead role.
2. Let the Indigenous organization define the outcome before you shape the budget. Do not arrive with a project proposal or a pre-scoped grant.
3. Make the prime contract with the Indigenous organization. Infrastructure partners (technical, narrative, legal) are funded as resources the Indigenous lead draws on, not as the lead.
4. Require explicit written consent before naming any Indigenous partner in reports, case studies, communications, or fundraising materials. Default to non-attribution.
5. Budget for stewardship, not just activity. Sometimes the deliverable is that a domain, archive, or capacity remains protected and available rather than being launched this cycle.
6. Move to multi-year general operating support with milestone-based reporting where possible. Twelve-month deliverable cycles often force the extractive pattern the protocol is designed to prevent.
7. Document your own protocol publicly. Foundations and ministries that publish their operating commitments make it easier for Indigenous-led organizations to evaluate whether to engage.

## Frequently asked questions.

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### **What does it mean that Pillar holds domains 'in stewardship'?**

Pillar's Indigenous-language-relevant .com domain inventory is held under an explicit stewardship commitment: no commercial development, no public association with a community, and no monetization without Indigenous-led partnership and written consent. The inventory exists to prevent these domains from being acquired and developed by commercial actors with no relationship to the language community. They are held in trust, available for activation only when an Indigenous organization decides — on its own timeline and terms — that the domain serves its work. Foundations underwriting this arrangement are funding protective capacity, not pipeline activity.

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## How does a foundation or ministry actually start a conversation under this protocol?

Engagement starts with an introduction call to the Indigenous organization, not to Pillar. [Pillar Institute \(/institute/\)](#) serves as introducer and facilitator — it can help identify which Indigenous-led organization is the right lead for a given language, region, or outcome area, and it can convene the initial conversation. But Pillar is not the prime contractor, the spokesperson, or the decision-maker for the work. The foundation's grantmaking relationship is with the Indigenous organization. Pillar's infrastructure role sits underneath that relationship, drawn on as the Indigenous organization directs.

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## Can we publicly name Indigenous partners in our reporting or communications?

Only with explicit written consent, and only on terms the Indigenous organization defines. The default is non-attribution. Many Indigenous-led organizations have specific reasons — political, legal, community-governance, or strategic — for controlling visibility, and the protocol respects that absolutely. Funders accustomed to case studies, logo placements, and named partner lists need to be prepared to report on impact in aggregated or anonymized form when that is what the partner requires. Consent can be granted for some uses and withheld for others, and it can be revoked.

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## How is this different from co-design or participatory research?

Co-design and participatory research frameworks generally retain decision authority with the non-Indigenous lead organization and invite Indigenous input into a process the lead controls. The Protocol of Letting Communities Lead transfers decision authority itself. The Indigenous organization decides whether work happens, what work happens, on what timeline, with what partners, and with what visibility. Pillar provides infrastructure capacity in stewardship — domains, technical hosting, narrative architecture, AI Labs research — but does not hold the lead role on the work.

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## What if our funding cycle requires deliverables on a fixed timeline?

This is worth raising explicitly with the Indigenous-led partner at the introduction stage, not after the relationship is established. Some outcomes can be sequenced to meet a funder timeline; others cannot, and forcing them produces exactly the extractive pattern the protocol is designed to prevent. Foundations and ministries with rigid annual cycles often find that multi-year general operating support, paired with milestone-based rather than deliverable-based reporting, fits the protocol better. If the funding architecture cannot flex at all, the most honest answer may be that this particular arrangement is not the right fit — which is itself a useful outcome of the protocol.

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