

Research Article

Beyond the Data Deficit: Rethinking Evidence-Based Policy Making in Northern Canada

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Abstract: Evidence-based policy making (EBPM) has become a normative gold standard in contemporary governance, yet its universal application obscures the colonial assumptions embedded in dominant evidence regimes. This article offers a normative critique of EBPM as it is currently imposed on northern and Indigenous contexts. It argues that the elevation of conventional, quantitative, and Eurocentric evidence forms reproduces structural and epistemic harms—that is, harms that emerge when dominant evidence standards dismiss or undervalue Indigenous knowledge and community-based ways of knowing—by holding northern governments to standards they were never resourced to meet, while simultaneously devaluing Indigenous epistemologies, land-based knowledge, and relational approaches to well-being. In doing so, EBPM generates artificial data scarcity, perpetuates colonial governance logics, and limits the potential for effective, locally grounded policy making. The article contends that meaningful reconciliation between EBPM and northern governance realities requires further research into methodologically-plural policy practices that recognize multiple ways of knowing, legitimize Indigenous-led data governance, and expand what counts as “adequate” evidence. Such an approach not only strengthens policy effectiveness but also advances the broader goals of reconciliation, self-determination, and epistemic justice. This reframing of EBPM is essential for building evidence systems that reflect the diversity, complexity, and sovereignty of the northern communities they are intended to serve.

Evidence-based policy making (EBPM) has become a prominent feature of contemporary governance discourse. This approach to policy making aims to apply scientific knowledge and analytical practices to address policy problems. The EBPM approach is championed as a means of improving transparency, accountability, and policy effectiveness. However, despite its promise, the application of EBPM in northern and Indigenous contexts reveals deep structural and methodological limitations. In regions like the Canadian northern territories (Nunavut, the Yukon, and the Northwest Territories), where data infrastructures are limited and policy capacity is constrained, the normative expectation that policy making ought to be “evidence based” often exceeds the practical means available to achieve it. These challenges are further complicated by small, dispersed populations and geographically remote communities. As a result, the ideal of EBPM risks reproducing inequities rather than resolving them. This risk is heightened by EBPM’s reliance on conventional, quantitative evidence that often fails to capture the lived realities of Indigenous and northern communities.

This article critically examines how the adoption of EBPM as a normative framework shapes policy making in data-scarce contexts and calls for methodological innovations to advance meaningful EBPM in northern Canada. While the EBPM paradigm presumes that enhanced data (in either quantity or statistical quality) leads to more informed policy, this logic falters in contexts where data scarcity, limited analytical capacity, and colonial legacies constrain what constitutes “evidence” (Straßheim, 2024; Wesselink et al., 2014). In regions without adequate conventional data, policy makers confront methodological deficits arising from a mismatch between EBPM ideals and regional realities. In an effort to pursue some semblance of EBPM, policy makers often rely on incomplete, irrelevant, and outdated data sets that may not reflect local epistemologies and priorities (Schneider et al., 2025; Wesselink et al., 2014; O’Dwyer, 2004). This disconnect between policy evidence and community realities results in abstract policies that often do not translate as beneficial policies on the ground.

Moreover, in addition to no tangible improvement in policy outcomes, the uncritical application of EBPM in data-scarce northern regions risks entrenching colonial hierarchies of knowledge by privileging Eurocentric standards of data collection and analysis over community-based conceptions of evidence and well-being (Maddison, 2012; Andersen, 2016; Konnerup & Kongsted, 2012; Nutley et al., 2013). EBPM approaches often face significant challenges when applied to Indigenous contexts, as Indigenous communities across Canada often experience exclusion from policy design processes, and existing data metrics frequently fail to capture the cultural and contextual realities of Indigenous ways of living (Maddison, 2012; Andersen, 2016; FNIGC, 2020; Robertson, 2023).

This article suggests that advancing EBPM in northern and Indigenous communities requires rethinking its methodological foundations, rather than continuing to invest further in existing data infrastructures and analytical capacity. Specifically, further research is needed to explore innovative methodological solutions for EBPM in these data-scarce regions. These new approaches must cultivate policy practices that are practical, culturally relevant, and grounded in the lived experiences of community members. This involves moving beyond narrow quantitative metrics toward methodological pluralism that integrates qualitative, participatory, and Indigenous Knowledge Systems as legitimate forms of evidence. By doing so, EBPM can be reimagined not as a fixed normative standard but as a flexible, contextually adaptive framework that supports inclusive and legitimate policy making in northern Canada and beyond.

Conceptual Frameworks

Central to this discussion about rethinking evidence-based policy processes in northern Canada is a distinction between conventional and non-conventional data. In this article, “conventional data” refers to evidence produced and aggregated through formal, standardized processes, such as surveys, censuses, administrative records, statistical reports, and epidemiological or demographic data sets (Phillips et al., 2020; Wesselink et al., 2014). This evidence is selected and legitimized through formal institutionalized methods like peer review, citation-based bibliometrics, and “expert” panels, which typically privilege quantifiability, replicability, comparability, and statistical or scientific legitimacy (Phillips et al., 2020; MacKillop & Furniss, 2023; Nutley et al., 2013; Wesselink et al., 2014). These institutional mechanisms rely on top-down (institution-centred, rather than community-centred) practices that prioritize efficiency and standardized policy rollout over inclusivity and cultural relevance, often marginalizing Indigenous voices in the process (Maddison, 2012). A prominent example of this dynamic is evident in federal long-term boil-water advisories, which primarily rely on water quality test results, technical assessments, and federally defined engineering indicators, rather than community perceptions of safety or lived experiences with drinking water (see Health Canada, 2021).

On the other hand, non-conventional data, more aptly referred to as contextual data, refers to evidence that emerges from community lived experiences, local practices, oral histories, relational world views, Indigenous epistemologies, and participatory community processes (Epstein et al., 2014; Hiwi, 2014; Hogan, 2014; Smith, 2012; Wallerstein & Duran, 2010). Unlike conventional data, which emphasizes generalizability, these non-conventional forms of evidence prioritize contextual accuracy and cultural relevance; they are locally specific, relational, and grounded in the social, cultural, and ecological realities of the communities

they aim to capture. This form of evidence prioritizes data that reflects the social, cultural, political, and institutional context within which a policy operates (Parkhurst, 2017). Notably, despite the value of contextual evidence in generating insights into how policies are experienced, interpreted, and enacted on the ground, a hierarchy of evidence continues to persist, wherein conventional forms often continue to dominate and be considered superior EBPM (Konnerup & Kongsted, 2012; Maddison, 2012). Given the overt dominance of this statistics-centred perspective in EBPM discourse, this article consciously uses the terms “evidence” and “data” interchangeably. However, in reality, conventional data and EBPM are not objective, and their applications in northern Canada raise questions about whether policy can (or should) aim for objectivity or if neutrality, in fact, risks perpetuating systemic inequities. However, despite the binary rhetoric that emerges from a hierarchical view of evidence, conventional and non-conventional forms of evidence are not mutually exclusive. In fact, recognizing both forms as complementary would likely facilitate evidence-based policy processes that are more inclusive and representative, particularly in regions like northern Canada where conventional data sets are limited or ill-suited to local realities (Straßheim, 2024; MacKillop & Furniss, 2023; Konnerup & Kongsted, 2012).

Relatedly, in this discussion, “adequate evidence” does not refer to the volume or statistical validity of data but to its fitness for informing policy making in a given context. Specifically, this refers to the quality of evidence in accurately capturing the lived realities, priorities, and socio-cultural dynamics of the target population. In northern regions, adequacy should also refer to whether the data is timely, ethically collected, and interpretable and acceptable by local governance. Using this broad definition of adequacy, a technically rigorous data set that lacks contextual validity is considered as inadequate as one that is incomplete. For example, a policy decision on housing in Iqaluit based entirely on a national data set, such as the census, is inadequately evidence-based. While this policy process may uphold data standards, by using a large N dataset to appease EBPM’s prioritization of data “quality,” much of the nuance and detail of local realities are lost (Parkhurst, 2017). With policy decisions so far removed from the contexts they aim to serve, this type of policy making can hardly be considered “evidence based.” This perspective on data adequacy draws on Parkhurst’s (2017) thesis that the good governance of evidence depends not only on methodological rigour but also on political and cultural relevance.

Northern Contexts

This article presupposes that Nunavut, the Yukon, and the Northwest Territories often lack sufficient conventional data to support evidence-based policy approaches. This supposed data scarcity is shaped by a series of structural constraints that limit the collection, storage, and analysis of data in the North. These constraints are threefold: resources, infrastructure, and cultural. First, Canada's territorial governments struggle to acquire the human capital needed for conventional EBPM due to a lack of staff with relevant training (OAG-Yukon, 2021; OAG-NWT, 2025). Given its emphasis on statistical data, EBPM depends on a range of hard skills in quantitative analysis, including complex coding, statistical modelling, econometric methods, and the management of large administrative data sets (Suazo-Galdames et al., 2025; Straßheim, 2024). Such capacity is unevenly distributed across jurisdictions and not often present in northern and Indigenous governments. Enhanced coding and technical data-management skills are particularly important in smaller northern communities, where data anonymization and privacy protection are of the utmost importance (Suazo-Galdames et al., 2025; Straßheim, 2024). However, with limited professional capacity and high staff turnover, regions like northern Canada often lack the specialized analytical expertise and institutional stability required to meet these standards (see OAG-Yukon, 2021; OAG-Nunavut, 2025; OAG-NWT, 2025).

This capacity issue is further compounded by limited data infrastructure in the North; the three territorial governments often lack not only the specialized personnel but also the hardware, server capacity, secure storage systems, and digital connectivity required to maintain and analyze large administrative data sets (see OAG-Yukon, 2021; OAG-Nunavut, 2025; OAG-NWT, 2025). This infrastructure gap reinforces existing disparities in analytical capacity and further undermines the feasibility of implementing EBPM as it is currently conceived.

Finally, the limited conventional data collection that does occur in the North is made more complex by cultural factors, including language barriers, survey fatigue, and intergenerational trauma (Walter & Suina, 2019). For example, many Indigenous Peoples have good reason to distrust governmental data collection, given past abuses including the use of registry and household data to facilitate child removal during the Residential School System and the Sixties Scoop (FNIGC, 2019; Robertson, 2023). This history, combined with decades of extractive and unethical research, produces both overt and tacit resistance to new surveys or research initiatives (Robertson, 2023).

However, as this article explains, despite these real constraints on the collection and analysis of conventional data in northern Canada, data scarcity in the North is, in large part, artificial. The North does not lack adequate data; in fact, it is an intensely rich terrain of community-generated evidence—if only we modify existing practices to better consider non-conventional data.

Mind the Gap: How EBPM Diverges from Northern Realities

Unfortunately, scholars and practitioners alike continue to emphasize the need for more and “better quality” data to address the North’s supposed data scarcity (Oliver et al., 2014). In essence, this is the continued domination of conventional data over non-conventional forms. However, this perspective and the perpetuation of conventional EBPM as a gold standard for policy making is flawed for three primary reasons: 1) it assumes the existence of extensive data capacity; 2) it perpetuates tensions between conventional and non-conventional data; and 3) it privileges colonial epistemologies that materially manifest in continued harm to northern communities.

In reality, the challenges of EBPM in northern and Indigenous contexts stem less from the absence of data than from the inadequacy of data forms. While increasing the quantity of quantitative data could improve statistical reliability, it does not resolve deeper issues of quality—namely, the cultural misalignment and interpretive bias embedded in conventional data and approaches. In fact, pursuing “more data” under existing frameworks might amplify epistemic inequities if it imposes Eurocentric methods and ways of knowing (Walter & Suina, 2019; Kukutai & Taylor, 2016; FNIGC, 2019).

The discourse’s persistent focus on “data gaps” and “quality” obscures a deeper methodological deficit: the disjunction between the academic rhetoric of EBPM and its uneven realization in practice. Scholars continue to call for more and better data, yet the pursuit of conventional evidence in regions like the Northwest Territories often proves impractical and, in some cases, counterproductive (Klick, 2016; Howlett, 2009; McMahan & Akçayır, 2022). If EBPM is treated as the best practice in settings with limited quantitative data, then the question is not whether the North should meet this standard, but how policy makers navigate the practical constraints of upholding it. In the absence of adequate, contextually appropriate methods, policy makers must either rely on incomplete data sets or seek traditional indicators that misrepresent local realities—both of which risk reproducing epistemic inequities and reinforcing colonial hierarchies of knowledge (Parkhurst, 2017; Andersen, 2016; Walter & Suina, 2019). This gap between normative aspirations and practical implementation reveals the limitations of EBPM as a supposedly neutral framework. It privileges a technocratic rationality that discounts lived experience and local expertise, thereby excluding alternative forms of evidence that could enhance relevance and legitimacy.

The Colonial Costs of EBPM

Without empowering northern communities to pursue meaningful EBPM (through both investing in their analytical capacity and a normative shift towards more holistic views of evidence that encompass non-conventional data), EBPM as a normative gold standard is a colonial construct. This domination manifests as two key forms of colonial violence: 1) northern communities are held to a standard they are not equipped to achieve, resulting in a continued colonial narrative of dependency and inadequacy, through which settlers impose dominance over Indigenous epistemologies and self-determination; and 2) northern communities' needs, aspirations, and realities are obscured by conventional data methods, culminating in suboptimal policy outcomes.

First, on the former effect, imposing a universal benchmark of “evidence-based” practice without providing the necessary tools to achieve it reflects a form of methodological colonialism—and one that privileges Eurocentric standards of knowledge production while marginalizing the epistemic (knowledge and lived-experience) realities of northern and Indigenous contexts (MacKillop & Furniss, 2023; Straßheim, 2024; Bryant, 2024; Maddox & Morton Ninomiya, 2024). This form of coloniality is not merely rhetorical; it is embedded in the institutional expectations, funding frameworks, and performance measures that guide public administration in the North. Northern governments are held to a gold standard of EBPM that presupposes robust administrative data systems, consistent population-level information, specialized analytical staff, and stable long-term funding. However, these prerequisites are unevenly distributed across Canada. For instance, in much of northern Canada, policy makers must navigate chronic capacity constraints, small and fluctuating populations, high staff turnover, limited statistical infrastructures, and federal funding structures that rarely align with the temporal or cultural realities of northern governance.

As a result, northern Canada faces a structurally-produced data deficit: an environment in which conventional forms of evidence are difficult to collect, expensive to maintain, and often ill-suited to local contexts. This deficit becomes self-reinforcing. Low data availability (i.e., data that fails to meet Eurocentric expectations of methodological rigour) is often interpreted as a sign of capacity issues or poor governance. In turn, these perceptions then “justify” continued external oversight and involvement. Rather than strengthening northern self-governance, this dynamic entrenches dependency and continues an historical pattern in which Indigenous and territorial governments are positioned as data-poor and thus “in need of” Eurocentric expertise. In turn, this cycle produces a persistent asymmetry: the North is expected to meet normative EBPM standards but lacks the institutional or methodological resources to do so. In reality,

addressing “data scarcity” in the North requires parallel investments in local analytical capacity and in governance models that enable Indigenous-led evidence building.

Moreover, conventional EBPM processes exclude Indigenous voices not only by sidelining non-conventional data but also by relying on institutional functions that assign value to evidence. Policy making in Indigenous contexts cannot be separated from issues of power, voice, and inequality (Maddison, 2012). Policies often stem from top-down structures that limit Indigenous self-determination, a dynamic that reflects institutional inertia and the dominance of non-Indigenous stakeholders in decision making (Maddison, 2012). In conventional EBPM practices, policies are frequently designed with an emphasis on streamlined implementation and measurability, sidelining the distinct needs and Knowledge Systems of Indigenous communities. This approach reinforces a top-down policy model that places decision-making power with non-Indigenous institutions, perpetuating institutional inequality by excluding Indigenous perspectives from policy design (Hiwi, 2014; Maddison, 2012). For example, territorial housing allocations are often determined through federally designed capital-planning templates that prioritize standardized cost-efficiency metrics over community-identified needs, leaving northern and Indigenous communities with constrained authority on how housing dollars are spent. This top-down structure sidelines northern priorities such as overcrowding, multi-family living, and culturally appropriate design, thereby reinforcing institutional dominance. This institutional exclusion fails to recognize Indigenous governance models, imposing limitations on Indigenous autonomy and perpetuating a one-size-fits-all approach (Brock et al., 2023; Hiwi, 2014; Maddison, 2012). This exclusion coupled with “universal” policy solutions is particularly harmful in northern and Indigenous contexts as these communities have distinct cultures, needs, and aspirations; northern and Indigenous communities are not monolithic and would not necessarily implement similar policy solutions, if empowered to lead local EBPM. The exclusion of Indigenous voices from the conventional EBPM process perpetuates imbalanced power dynamics in policy making, with decisions frequently made by non-Indigenous actors whose agendas may not align with Indigenous priorities (Hiwi, 2014; Maddison, 2012). These structural barriers restrict Indigenous communities from crafting policies that reflect their cultural values and governance practices (Brock et al., 2023).

Furthermore, this institutional exclusion not only undermines Indigenous self-determination but risks perpetuating a form of cultural erasure, where Indigenous voices are either excluded from decision making or misrepresented within frameworks that do not acknowledge their unique epistemologies (Andersen, 2016; Brock et al., 2023; Hiwi, 2014). EBPM’s preference for

measurable evidence often reduces Indigenous Knowledge to secondary or supplementary status, undermining its richness and legitimacy (Hiwi, 2014; Brock et al., 2023). This limitation speaks to a broader issue within EBPM: balancing technical rigour with cultural relevance, as Indigenous Knowledge is frequently viewed as supplementary rather than integral to evidence bases. For example, in the past, caribou management decisions in the Northwest Territories frequently prioritized aerial population surveys over Inuit and Dene land-based knowledge, positioning Indigenous observations as anecdotal and contributing to management outcomes that failed to reflect community understandings of caribou health and ecosystem change (Parlee & Caine, 2018; Kendrick, 2008).

Simultaneously, EBPM's adoption as a normative ideal of good governance has not necessarily translated into more informed policy processes or improved outcomes, particularly in northern and Indigenous contexts (Head, 2005; Pearce et al., 2014). The assumption that EBPM inherently leads to better decision making obscures the uneven distribution of institutional and methodological capacities across regions. Effective EBPM in Indigenous communities demands better metrics that accurately capture Indigenous realities. By focusing solely on quantitative empirical measures, EBPM can inadvertently marginalize Indigenous communities, whose ways of knowing often involve qualitative, narrative, and experiential forms of knowledge (Andersen, 2016; Hiwi, 2014; Maddison, 2012). These forms are deeply tied to cultural contexts and traditional practices that cannot be fully captured by standardized data points (Andersen, 2016). As a result, policies driven by narrow data sets may overlook the complexities of Indigenous ways of life, leading to outcomes that are disconnected from the lived realities of these communities (Andersen, 2016; Brock et al., 2023; Maddison, 2012).

For example, the remediation of Giant Mine in Yellowknife, Northwest Territories, highlights how epistemic exclusion can reproduce colonial harm as technocratic risk assessments and engineering models were prioritized over Yellowknives Dene knowledge about land safety and contamination pathways, even as community members reported concerns grounded in lived experience. Subsequent biomonitoring research showing elevated inorganic arsenic exposure among residents of Ndilo, Dettah, and Yellowknife, including heightened risks for children, revealed the tangible health effects of ignoring Indigenous evidence (Cheung et al., 2020; Sandlos & Keeling, 2016). In this way, the marginalization of Indigenous knowledge within EBPM not only erases community expertise but perpetuates material and intergenerational forms of colonial violence.

Without culturally tailored and community-centred data, policies risk being ineffective or alienating. Therefore, EBPM should integrate Indigenous Knowledge Systems, which value qualitative, experiential insights as essential

evidence (Brock et al., 2023; Hiwi, 2014; Maddison, 2012). When data is wholly inadequate, as defined in this article's conceptual framework, it often fails to capture the unique challenges Indigenous communities face, resulting in policies that may be ineffective or even harmful (Andersen, 2016). For instance, according to Andersen (2016), data on Indigenous health is frequently aggregated or applied inconsistently across distinct communities, obscuring specific needs such as the higher prevalence of certain chronic illnesses or mental health conditions. Without culturally relevant metrics that reflect Indigenous realities, such as factors related to land-based practices, traditional diets, and intergenerational trauma, policies are shaped by data that reflects non-Indigenous populations, creating interventions that may miss the distinct variables of Indigenous contexts (Andersen, 2016). This data gap perpetuates a form of colonial violence where Indigenous needs are obscured by reliance on non-Indigenous standards, reinforcing policies that overlook Indigenous-specific needs. Addressing these limitations with culturally specific indicators would enable more responsive, equitable, and effective policies to improve policy outcomes in Indigenous contexts (Anderson, 2016).

A promising example of a culturally tailored and community-centred approach can be seen in Nunavut, where recent efforts to integrate Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit (IQ) principles in territorial health frameworks demonstrate how Indigenous epistemologies can guide policy design. Rather than subordinating Inuit knowledge to biomedical indicators, the IQ health system emphasizes land-based well-being, relational healing, and community-defined measures of health, offering a concrete illustration of how culturally grounded evidence can improve both relevance and legitimacy in public health policy (Akearok et al., 2023). While still developing, the model shows how Indigenous Knowledge Systems can be operationalized as core evidence, rather than supplementary insight, to support more culturally aligned and community-led policy outcomes (Akearok et al., 2023).

Reconciling EBPM and Northern Contexts

Supporting Indigenous-led evidence-building initiatives is not simply a matter of inclusion but of epistemic justice. Methodological pluralism that integrates both quantitative indicators and community-defined qualitative evidence offers a more meaningful pathway toward data adequacy, empowering Indigenous self-determination and improving policy outcomes in the North. Emerging frameworks of Indigenous data sovereignty and participatory research partnerships offer practical pathways to address the capacity and legitimacy gaps identified above (Smith, 2012; Wilson, 2008; Kovach, 2021). These approaches assert that Indigenous communities should determine what data are collected, how they are used, and who benefits from their use. Such models move beyond inclusion to

genuine co-governance of evidence, ensuring that policy making is accountable to local epistemologies and priorities. In doing so, they reconfigure the meaning of evidence itself from a static input to a relational, community-driven process of knowledge creation.

Indeed, Indigenous Knowledge Systems offer an important corrective to the narrow empiricism of conventional EBPM. Indigenous epistemologies emphasize relationality, experience, and holistic understandings of community well-being as valid and vital forms of knowledge for policy making in the North. Integrating these epistemologies into EBPM frameworks could address the methodological deficit and its colonial implications by expanding what counts as legitimate evidence, and grounding policy decisions in the realities of target populations. For example, Indigenous hunters routinely monitor changes in sea ice stability, animal migration routes, and weather patterns through lived experience and long-term relational engagement with the environment. These observations rooted in daily practice, rather than discrete measurements, offer holistic insights into ecological well-being that can meaningfully inform environmental policy but are rarely captured by conventional climate data sets.

Moreover, when EBPM processes meaningfully incorporate Indigenous ways of knowing, they may foster trust and political engagement by aligning policy with cultural and community priorities. Culturally informed EBPM, which considers local evidence on par with conventionally quantitative data, is a necessary component of self-determination and improved policy outcomes in northern communities (Brock et al., 2023; Hiwi, 2014; Hogan et al., 2014).

When Indigenous communities are included in data collection, ownership, and interpretation, they can ensure that evidence reflects community-defined indicators of well-being and governance success. Research on Indigenous data sovereignty shows that when Indigenous communities govern data systems, the resulting evidence more accurately captures relational, cultural, and land-based dimensions of well-being that are systematically overlooked in Western evidence paradigms (FNIGC, 2020; Kukutai & Taylor, 2016; Walter & Suina, 2019). Such a shift is not merely procedural; it fundamentally reshapes the evidentiary foundations of policy making by aligning what counts as “evidence” with Indigenous epistemologies and community priorities.

An alignment between data and lived reality leads to more accurate problem diagnosis, better targeting of interventions, and policy designs that reflect community-identified needs rather than external assumptions (Maddison, 2012; Walter & Suina, 2019). This integration produces more effective and targeted interventions, where policy design reflects the realities of local populations rather than external assumptions imposed through Eurocentric metrics (Kukutai & Taylor, 2016). Moreover, Indigenous inclusion in evidence systems enhances

institutional legitimacy. When evidence is produced through Indigenous protocols, accountability norms, and ethical frameworks, rather than through extractive or colonial data practices, community trust in governance strengthens (FNIGC, 2020). In turn, this trust, cultural alignment, and community participation are key drivers of policy uptake, compliance, and long-term success (Maddison, 2012).

In short, Indigenous and community data governance improves policy outcomes not by increasing the quantity of data, but by transforming the quality, relevance, and the bases of evidence used in public decision making. When northern and Indigenous communities shape what evidence is collected, how it is interpreted, and which indicators matter, policies become more responsive, more legitimate, and more likely to produce durable, community-supported outcomes (Walter & Suina, 2019; Kukutai & Taylor, 2016; FNIGC, 2020). This autonomy also mitigates the historical misuse of data as a colonial instrument of surveillance and control.

For example, participatory and culturally relevant models enhance the cultural relevance of EBPM by directly involving Indigenous community members in the policy making process to shape policies that reflect their unique cultural values, needs, and experiences. These models contrast sharply with imposed policies that may lack community resonance (Brock et al., 2023; Hogan et al., 2014). These approaches demonstrate that Indigenous-led EBPM can yield more sustainable and effective policy outcomes when culturally aligned with the unique experiences and values of Indigenous people (Bryant, 2024; Maddox & Morton Ninomiya, 2024; Hogan et al., 2014). In the health and education domains, in particular, a participatory approach fosters a sense of ownership and agency within the community, ensuring that policies are not imposed from the outside but are co-created with those who are most affected (Bryant, 2024; Maddox & Morton Ninomiya, 2024; Hogan et al., 2014). In doing so, these models address the historical exclusion of Indigenous voices in policy making, where top-down approaches have often led to policies that lack cultural relevance or community buy-in. This shift from efficiency-focused, top-down approaches to inclusive, collaborative frameworks offers a pathway to more equitable policy outcomes that respect Indigenous autonomy and uphold culturally resonant values, thus challenging the institutional biases inherent in mainstream EBPM practices (Brock et al., 2023; Bryant, 2024; Maddox & Morton Ninomiya, 2024). Moreover, an inclusive approach enhances the legitimacy and effectiveness of EBP, fostering evidence informed and culturally resonant policies that support Indigenous self-determination and well-being more authentically (Andersen, 2016; Maddison, 2012; Smith, 2012; Wilson, 2008; Kovach, 2021). In the simplest terms, self-determination requires empowering Indigenous communities to shape the policies that affect them.

Conclusion

This article addresses foundational questions about evidence, agency, and institutional reform that underscore the complexity and transformative potential of EBPM in northern and Indigenous contexts. The fragmented yet evolving nature of EBPM in northern Canada underscores the urgent need for discourse on the contentious gaps that characterize this field. Effective EBPM, particularly in northern and Indigenous contexts, must move beyond the pursuit of more data toward a deeper rethinking of methodological practice (MacKillop & Furniss, 2023; Nutley & Davies, 2013; Wesselink et al., 2014). Logistical constraints such as small population sizes, limited administrative capacity, and rigid funding mechanisms compound these methodological challenges (Suazo-Galdames et al., 2025; Straßheim, 2024). These foundational misalignments reveal that EBPM not only fails to capture the realities of northern and Indigenous communities but also perpetuates colonial violence in these communities, not due to an absence of data but because of the absence of a methodological pluralism capable of accommodating diverse evidentiary forms. Reassessing EBPM as a normative framework is therefore essential if it is to respond meaningfully to the epistemological and political realities of northern and Indigenous governance.

New approaches to EBPM adapted for northern contexts need to not only include Indigenous Knowledge, but also do so in ways that respect the distinct epistemologies of Indigenous Knowledge rather than translating it into Western metrics. Reconciling these views will involve broadening the concept of evidence to encompass both quantitative and qualitative data alongside Indigenous methodologies such as storytelling and Land-based Knowledge. By integrating Indigenous ways of knowing with scientific approaches, future policy development can better capture the cultural and contextual realities of Indigenous life to support policies that are empirically sound and deeply rooted in the lived experiences and values of Indigenous communities (Brock et al., 2023; Hiwi, 2014; Hogan et al., 2014). This inclusive EBPM model would better respect Indigenous epistemologies, enhance cross-cultural collaboration, and lead to more equitable and sustainable outcomes, shifting the focus from a one-size-fits-all model to one that is adaptive and responsive to the diverse ways of knowing and being within northern and Indigenous communities.

Moreover, as the field of EBPM in northern and Indigenous contexts continues to navigate tensions among data rigour, cultural relevance, and institutional challenges, a more integrative approach to policy making will be essential. New models must privilege contextual relevance over universal norms, value relational knowledge alongside empirical data, and reorient policy processes around the lived experiences of local populations. Bridging the methodological deficit in the North thus requires a paradigm shift from top-down technocracy

to grounded, pluralistic evidence-building that recognizes both the limits of conventional EBPM and the transformative potential of Indigenous Knowledge Systems. This approach would ensure that policies are grounded in empirical evidence and resonate with Indigenous Peoples' priorities and self-determined goals, fostering greater ownership and more sustainable outcomes (Hiwi, 2014; Hogan et al., 2014; Maddison, 2012). Ultimately, such policy approaches would promote Indigenous sovereignty in data collection and use, supporting policies that reflect Indigenous world views and governance systems rather than continuing to impose external frameworks that risk marginalizing these communities.

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