

Engaging Northern Aboriginal Youth Key to Sustainable Development

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Abstract: This paper argues that governments, industry, and educational institutions need to engage better with Aboriginal communities when it comes to training and economic development initiatives in Northern Saskatchewan. Building accessible programs and engaging with youth are keys to sustainable development. The social capital in northern communities is resilient and embedded in kinship networks, but with the fast-growing youth population, increased collaborative engagement between communities, governments, training institutions, and industry is required to help build relevant programs for youth. Findings from the 2009–2012 Northern Aboriginal Political Engagement study suggest that, given the opportunity and proper incentives, northern Aboriginal youth want to and will engage in the development of themselves and their communities. Most youth believe that priority should also be given to address problems with addictions (alcohol, drugs). At a minimum, these findings imply that better coordination is needed between health programs (mental health and addiction) and training and economic development programs for youth. This paper is part of a special collection of brief discussion papers presented at the 2014 Walleye Seminar held in Northern Saskatchewan, which explored consultation and engagement with northern communities and stakeholders in resource development.

Introduction

While popular notions of economic growth are attributed to the three main factors of production (land, labour, and capital), related elements like social capital (the collective efforts of relational norms and networks) are also important for producing mutual benefits (Woolcock, 1998; Woolcock and Narayan, 2000). Social capital, in the form of community or civic engagement, is broadly acknowledged as a contributor to good government and economic

progress by helping to build the requisite values of generalized reciprocity, transparency, and collective action (Putnam, 1993; Berdahl et al., 2011). The idea of social capital is based on norms and networks that motivate people to act collectively. While most people will likely agree on the importance of collective actions, they may not agree on how to move forward in northern socio-economic environments.

This paper argues that governments, industry, and educational institutions need to better engage communities when it comes to training and economic development initiatives in northern Saskatchewan. Access to appropriate programs is pivotal. The social capital in northern communities is resilient and embedded in kinship networks (Beatty et al., 2013), but with the fast-growing youth population, more collaborative engagement between communities, governments, training institutions, and industry is required to help build relevant programs for youth. Some ideas include having more community-based, accessible, and relevant skill development training; long-term entrepreneurial support opportunities and mentorship; and health and wellness programs that correspond better to northern realities.

Based on the Northern Aboriginal Political Engagement study, this paper further suggests that given the opportunity and proper incentives, northern Aboriginal youth are eager and willing to engage in political and economic activities that will contribute to sustainable development in Northern Saskatchewan. While the study found that youth are underrepresented in political and community activities, they are not disinterested in community developments to the extent that is generally believed. Youth participants believe that community involvement is important and wish to engage, but they lack the local opportunities, resources, and incentives to make it meaningful.

The findings in this study suggest that Aboriginal youth in Northern Saskatchewan think priority should be given to addressing drug and alcohol addictions and the absence of relevant programs and services in their communities. This implies that northern development strategies, including economic development and training programs, should be integrated with mental health and addiction programs to ensure relevance and educational attainment. The youth concerns for addressing addictions in youth programs is consistent with national Aboriginal youth sentiments. According to the 2008 Report of the Roundtable on Aboriginal Youth by the Government of Canada's Policy Research Initiative, Aboriginal youth participants from across the country had similar concerns for their future. Some key themes for action include increasing educational attainment, achieving family and community well-being, reducing Aboriginal youth incarceration in the

criminal justice system, and changing the way governments and Aboriginal communities work together by improving collaborative practices and community-based policies and by having more relevant programs (Kroes, 2008).

Engaging Northern Aboriginal Youth

Community engagement is inherent in northern Aboriginal culture, but it is also subject to modernization pressures from within and without. The history of northern Aboriginal peoples is rooted in resilient kinship networks often adapted to time and change. The contemporary social capital consists of an accepted culture of families, friends, and associates helping one another and working together to build their communities while following a mixed economy of land-based livelihoods (commercial fishing, trapping) and wage income (Beatty, 1996; Beatty et al., 2013). Yet in spite of this rich socio-economic history, it is also widely known that the benefits from northern mining and other resource developments have not trickled down to Aboriginal communities. Few Aboriginal communities have been able to engage in the exploration and development pursuits happening in their own backyards. Adherence to rigid and official interpretations of “duty to consult” requirements for those engaging in resource developments around northern communities are undercutting community engagement opportunities. The resulting economic and political marginalization does not bode well for the future of Aboriginal youth or for sustainable northern development. Aboriginal youth who grow up in poor communities tend to face greater poverty-associated risks of violence, alcohol and drug addictions, and high suicide rates (Kroes, 2008), all of which will likely feed the increasing youth perceptions of alienation from decision makers and outside interests. It is therefore vital to ensure local access to training and educational opportunities by investing in and training the growing Aboriginal youth population in their own communities, as a supplement to the current method of offering training in major centres.

Due to demographic contrasts, policy issues can be expected to differ between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal populations in Saskatchewan, especially in the North. A better understanding of northern youth perceptions and attitudes towards political processes and factors affecting their engagement is important. Youth growing up in the North are more likely to be interested in politics at the community level, and more likely to be aware of what their local leadership is doing or not doing, since they are able to see the relationship between local politics and their everyday lives (Bishop and Preiner, 2005). Youth are therefore a significant potential resource to help

inform how governments, industry, and Aboriginal communities can better work together for the best mutual outcomes (Kroes, 2008) today and in the future.

Northern economic growth also needs to be better blended with the aspirations of the large youth population in communities throughout the North. The public and private sectors can network more effectively with communities to develop suitable and accessible education and job-training strategies and programs. Generally, most training opportunities are limited to central towns and agencies, which can be a barrier to the youth living in smaller communities who may be interested but cannot afford to relocate.

Engagement is about connection. Connecting youth engagement to education and economic development makes sense and is not a new idea for First Nations in general. Concern for the proper education of First Nations youth was evident in the early treaties with the British Crown and, later, Canada. The underlying idea in treaties for the proper education of young people was not to stick First Nations children in foreign and distant residential schools, but to enhance their traditional knowledge and learning in their communities with the new skills and knowledge that they needed to make a living (*Pimachesowin*) in a changing world. In 1947, Joseph Dreaver, one of the early leaders of the Union of Saskatchewan Indians, advised a special joint parliamentary committee on the *Indian Act* that the greatest need was a “proper education” (Office of the Treaty Commissioner, 2007: 46).

In Northern Saskatchewan, this reference to a “proper education” can be broadly described as accredited and accessible education and training in the communities, a theme that was reiterated in 2009 at a planning meeting of northern leaders developing the University of Saskatchewan’s International Centre for Northern Governance and Development. Some leaders at the meeting described the North as a region that experiences Third World conditions with large-scale industry coming into the region. They stressed that Aboriginal peoples needed to be part of the decision making by governments and industry in order to ensure that northern developments benefit the communities and are environmentally friendly in order to sustain the forests, lakes, and rivers for the future generations. This theme was further corroborated by the findings in the Northern Aboriginal Political Engagement study where youth identified a need for opportunities and support for education and training in their communities, along with a need to protect their northern culture and traditional ways of life (Beatty et al., 2013).

Clearly, education and development are keys to meaningful engagement and offer youth a means for realizing personal and collective goals for a good

standard of living. Aboriginal leaders, youth, and others broadly agree that relevant training, employment, and entrepreneurial activities are requisite elements of successful northern economic development. These will be very difficult to achieve without having strong and healthy communities that can engage in productive collaboration (Berdahl et al., 2011). Co-operation among service providers is important. The days of delivering programs and services demarcated into islands of distinct services must change in order to enable a better response to demographic conditions, rising costs, multi-jurisdictional gaps, and challenges in addressing the complex human issues that cross the so-called “soft” services (health, education, social) and “hard” services (economic development, trades training). Engagement among services to accommodate youth can be done through various means, perhaps through more inter-agency collaboration and specific measures to address health and social issues in existing training and economic development programs.

The Region and Its People

Northern Saskatchewan is a large remote region that is *ekistak* (rich) in both natural resources and people. The Saskatchewan government identifies the North as the Northern Administration District (NAD), a distinct administrative region dating back to the 1948 *Northern Administration Act*. It consists of about half of Saskatchewan’s land area, but less than 4 percent of the province’s population (Government of Saskatchewan, 2014). It is a region of contrasts. On one hand, First Nations and Métis people enjoy a blended way of life that straddles hunting, fishing, and trapping, and making a living from employment and entrepreneurship. On the other hand, they face the challenge of capacity building among a rapidly growing youth population that is undereducated and struggling with alcohol and drug addictions (Beatty et al., 2013). According to the Government of Saskatchewan website, over 80 percent of the northern population of 37,000 is Aboriginal, consisting mostly of the Woodland Cree, Dené, and Métis peoples. It is a fast-growing population with an estimated two-thirds under thirty-five years of age (Government of Saskatchewan, 2014) and over 32 percent under fifteen years of age, which is among the highest in Canada (Beatty et al., 2013). Over half of the First Nations people in Northern Saskatchewan reside on federal Indian reserves.

Comparatively, the Aboriginal picture in Saskatchewan, as a whole, is similar. Saskatchewan has among the highest concentration of Aboriginal populations in western Canada relative to its population—about 142,000 of approximately one million in 2006 (Elliot, 2009). The Aboriginal population is much younger compared to the non-Aboriginal population, with about

55 percent under twenty-five years of age compared to 31 percent of the non-Aboriginal population; and only 18 percent over forty-five years of age or older compared to 44 percent of the non-Aboriginal population (Elliott, 2009). The Aboriginal youth sector in Saskatchewan remains an obvious, but underdeveloped, potential labour force that still requires a strategic training and employment strategy geared to acknowledge and respond to their physical and social environments.

The northern region is and will continue to be economically significant due to the abundant natural resources and the ever-increasing market demands for energy, base and precious metals, diamonds, and other minerals. It is also home to Aboriginal societies who still hold, in varying degrees, the cultural values and belief systems of their hunting, trapping, and gathering ancestors. While the youth, in particular, face an uncertain future in a region characterized by large, competing economic interests, not to mention confusing multi-level political jurisdictions, there is broad agreement that their involvement is important.

The Northern Aboriginal Political Engagement Study: Overview

The Northern Aboriginal Political Engagement study was a three-year project (2009–2012) funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC). It consisted of a telephone survey administered in English, Cree, and Dené, in the NAD area (2010), followed up by a series of youth focus groups across Northern Saskatchewan (Beatty et al., 2013). While the telephone survey was successful in capturing northern Aboriginal perspectives on political and community engagement (505 of the 851 respondents were Aboriginal), it also showed that the youth (between eighteen and twenty-four years) were underrepresented. The researchers' decision to conduct youth focus groups sought to address this gap in youth representation.

About 92 percent of youth telephone respondents reported not voting in the last federal election, with similar results coming from the youth focus groups. The comments ranged from being too busy, not being interested, not having proper identification, a lack of awareness of the election, and a perception that voting would not change things for their communities. It was suggested that youth would be interested in federal voting if they felt the issues were going to affect them directly, such as losing or enhancing their Aboriginal and treaty rights. Similarly, telephone respondents showed little interest in provincial politics and most did not vote. Focus group participants commented that they were not worried about "out there," and that changes would not take place or affect their community since political

representatives rarely came to the community, thus contributing to the lack of information about and awareness of provincial elections and politics. Many felt that the provincial government needed to state its intentions more clearly to Aboriginal communities. They indicated that if they (youth) had an increased understanding, they would likely vote, especially if something visibly positive was to happen in their community.

The Aboriginal telephone survey respondents were only slightly more interested in municipal politics. The focus group participants provided some context to this lack of interest suggesting they would be interested if more issues were addressed and changes with leadership and the local government were evident. In one community, focus group participants mentioned they were very interested and did vote because the municipal government does a lot for the community. However, the majority indicated they were not satisfied due to accountability problems, rumours concerning leadership, the lack of effective community representation, and absence of information about municipal politics.

It was interesting, however, that over 70 percent of youth believed that it was very or somewhat important for people to vote in their band council elections, although over half (52 percent) reported not voting in their last band elections. Again, the reasons for not voting suggest that youth did not feel that their vote counted and often felt ignored after the elections.

Communication methods are also changing the North. Social media is fast becoming a popular tool of communication for youth. About 44 percent of telephone respondents reported participating in online political discussions in the past year through Facebook, Twitter, blogs, and other forms of social media. The focus groups confirmed the popularity of social media for political engagement, and identified Facebook as the more preferred means of communication. However, the growing shift of posting political information through social media was also cause for concern, since the open access made it easier to voice subjective opinions that could be hurtful to others.

Community engagement is considered important as well. Over 65 percent of Aboriginal youth telephone respondents believed it was important to engage in community events and activities, a theme that was reflected in the youth focus groups. The reasons cited for active community engagement ranged from feelings of accomplishment, better mental health, role model development, and the fostering of positive community motivation. Sports and recreation activities were identified as examples.

Notwithstanding modern conveniences, over 78 percent of the Aboriginal youth respondents believed that the traditional ways of life are

still important and should be maintained. This was also reflected in the youth focus groups. Some themes included ideas that traditional activities were a northern way of life with social, personal, and ceremonial aspects, and that cultural identity was rooted in traditional culture. In the view of respondents, each generation has a responsibility to pass on the culture, knowledge, and traditions they inherit from their ancestors before they are lost for good. Most of the traditional activities identified included hunting, trapping, fishing, gathering wild roots and berries, being out on the trapline with family, commercial fishing, and helping the elderly. In fact, over 92 percent reported giving away or sharing northern traditional foods, such as moose meat or fish, with others. Also, the majority of youth were equally concerned about protecting their Aboriginal languages, with about 46 percent of the telephone respondents reporting they could speak their language very well or relatively well.

Overall Youth Concerns

Overall, the youth engagement portion of the Northern Aboriginal Engagement study suggested that northern youth were not apathetic as far as engaging in activities that they perceived as being helpful, fun, and useful, as well as those that generated positive feedback and good visible outcomes in their communities (Beatty et al., 2013). The survey findings support arguments many community people have advanced for years. Most training is situated in larger towns and urban centres, but the cuts to post-secondary educational funding, the high costs of living in cities, and cross-cultural differences, among other factors, limit access for grade twelve students from northern communities. Northern leaders have suggested that partnerships with existing training institutions need to be explored to provide accredited training in the communities that is applicable to employability, including things that industry needs. It was stressed that planners need to look at education and training delivery in a different way, such as piloting technical and other trades programs. In either case, First Nations and Métis people need to be a part of the planning.

The importance of protecting and maintaining northern Aboriginal languages, cultures, and traditional economic pursuits were evident themes in the Northern Aboriginal Engagement study. Culturally relevant opportunities are therefore important (some might argue indispensable) for building healthy relationships and leadership skills to increase youth engagement (Crooks et al., 2010). Furthermore, culture and community-specific knowledge contain values and conceptual frameworks that determine how Aboriginal people live and make sense of the world. Some

educators suggest that Aboriginal sources of strength stemming from family and community structures are crucial for navigating the challenges of negative schooling experiences, like racism (Hare and Pidgeon, 2011). The need to ensure that cultural traditions are passed on to future generations, including land-based knowledge and skills, through cultural education programs with Elders is crucial (Parlee et al., 2007).

Social changes, and the influence of technology and communications, are modern realities for northern youth that also need to be acknowledged in development and training initiatives. The use of social media, especially Facebook, allows youth to post discussions within and beyond their community. The Internet has brought globalization to northern households, with its negative and positive elements. The use of Internet and social networking allow youth to upload multimedia productions; comment on pictures and videos; announce activities; and post thoughts, ideas, and concerns of their community (Kral, 2011). Unfortunately, some of the changes can also be very harmful to youth if not properly monitored. If youth are not educated in Internet use, this can keep youth away from fully engaging in community and political events.

Accessible and healthy recreational activities are promoted as popular forms of community engagement for youth, providing a sense of purpose and ensuring youth have useful roles within the community (Crooks et al., 2010). Recreational and educational activities are important preferences for northern youth according to the findings in the northern Aboriginal engagement study. Recreational programs help develop youth, as well as the communities in which they live.

Some Ideas for Youth Engagement

While there are many projects for improving youth engagement in northern training and economic development, few are provided as possibilities for communities considering efforts to promote youth engagement. Many scholars acknowledge the importance of approaching youth capacity building through a holistic lens, one that considers the developmental stages of young adulthood. Mental health is rarely identified in economic development literature, yet is an important factor when considering the struggles of many northern youth living with addictions and other social problems. Going to school and working is extremely challenging even without having to deal with personal addiction problems at the same time. Some health scholars suggest that community development and support is crucial for sustained improvement in the mental health and economic well-being of youth and families. Most successful programs for Aboriginal

youth are community-based and involve active partnerships across sectors (Kirmayer et al., 2009).

Some projects look at northern youth engagement and leadership through the lens of entrepreneurship. In northern Alberta, for example, the Athabasca Tribal Council (ATC) Youth Entrepreneur Camp encourages youth entrepreneurship through summer camps. The ATC Youth Entrepreneurship Camp offers participants an opportunity to learn about starting a business. Furthermore, participants engage in personal and professional development workshops such as public speaking, self-analysis, and team building. It also provides cultural activities and teachings from Elders, Aboriginal storytellers, artisans, dancers, and others in an interactive environment. Science camps are also a good incentive for youth. An estimated 500 students from the Athabasca Basin attended one-week summer science camps sponsored by industry partners (Government of Saskatchewan, 2013).

Mentorship in employment and training programs can also teach valuable work values and practices. Community contracts with various industries, such as line cutting and site preparation, help develop entrepreneurship, build personal work ethics, and enhance skills by pairing youth with experienced contractors doing work activities out on the land. Trapper training programs that combine classroom and experiential education methods can also provide similar blended training of land skills and transferable work habits that are often marginalized in mainstream economic development planning.

There are many other innovative strategies that need to be explored, including new ways of delivering education and training programs. Bringing small town students into classrooms in the cities is not conducive to productive learning. Current challenges call for blended models of experience and theory, both in and out of the classroom. Education and training can also be provided by way of virtual technologies via videoconferencing and other means. What is evident from the northern Aboriginal engagement study and other such work is that engaging Aboriginal youth in all forms of economic and social development is necessary for sustainable development in the North. Youth need to have accessible training and education opportunities in their communities. Both private and public institutions need to engage more effectively with northern Aboriginal communities and youth to develop relevant programs that produce better educational and employment outcomes.

Conclusion

Clearly, youth engagement contains considerable potential for program and policy innovation. While much programming is being done for youth, more collaboration is needed to build sustainable programs that are accessible in the communities and across the North. This issue is one of the most important in the Provincial North. Without proper opportunities for northern and Aboriginal youth, the prospects for socio-economic stability and sustainability in the region are dim indeed. Research shows, contrary to expectations, that young people are ready and willing to engage, but only if the programs and opportunities hold out a realistic prospect for an improvement in their futures. Proceeding slowly, or keeping programs within administrative or government silos, will harm Aboriginal youth in the North, and undermine the effectiveness of efforts to create stronger and more sustainable Aboriginal communities in the region.

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