

Editor's Introduction

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Yale Belanger

In recent years the profile of Aboriginal economic development (AED) has steadily increased. Thanks in part to the success of the Membertou and Osoyoos First Nations, and the continual media spotlight directed at First Nation casinos, AED is now acknowledged as a central component of nation-building and cited as requisite to ensuring local political and social stability.

Yet, AED is still often framed in basic terms: as an investigative site of agency and form of resistance to colonization; as an interesting footnote to self-government's continued evolution; or it is presented in a way that subtly suggests the progressive utility of adopting capitalism versus the regressive nature of retaining traditional economic processes. AED has however progressed beyond these basic taxonomies and arguably demands more rigorous and intensive approaches to research needed to nuance out the often invisible undercurrents that significantly influence economic success or failure. The following papers demonstrate that the study of AED can be incredibly complex and embrace multiple approaches: from probing research methodologies and the role indigenous knowledge can potentially play in academic research; to employing complex statistical methods to study the impact of federal and provincial policies; to appreciating global technology trends on AED initiatives.

As anyone working in Aboriginal economic development will attest, community success often hinges on the compatibility of local initiatives with non-Native development strategies. Aboriginal economic development officers and community-political leaders must

also ensure that their strategies remain compatible with federal policies — failure to do so could undermine one's ability to foster local development. In the first survey of its kind conducted in Canada, Adam Wellstead and Richard Stedman utilize data collected from First Nations and non-Native individuals involved with formulating federal First Nations forestry policy to determine precisely the central issues affecting First Nations forestry in Canada. As the authors demonstrate, First Nations seeking to expand into forestry have to contend with no less than 12 policy communities representing interests ranging from provincial and territorial agents to the private sector. Each policy community has forged its own distinctive perceptions of the major barriers confronting First Nations, although the authors found that First Nations and non-Native informants generally see eye-to-eye concerning the relative importance of each of the variables examined. However, two specific camps were evident showing that First Nations and non-Native agents disagreed concerning policy orientation, existing barriers and natural threats. With the First Nations Forestry Program set to expire in 2009, the opinions catalogued here merit serious consideration during the anticipated policy formulation stage.

The age of ever-improving Information Communications Technology (ICT) has resulted in increased connectivity, leaving it possible for an individual in Canada to quickly access a colleague in Australia as the barriers to communication quickly fall and the electronic global village takes root. These ideas form the foundation for Laura Lamb's article probing the benefits this new economy may offer Aboriginal people. In particular the author asks, does ICT offer Aboriginal communities an economic opportunity previously unavailable due to geographic isolation? Using the Neechi principles forged at an Aboriginal-owned Winnipeg co-operative as her interpretive lens, Lamb profiles three First Nations-operated call centers to determine whether their success is due to luck or economic fundamentals. Lamb generally concludes that the issues are dynamic, which makes it difficult to determine success for communities adopting what the author describes as back-office services, or the delivery of off-site services such as customer service and administrative support. Nevertheless, and despite various challenges, the author concludes that the new economy indeed offers opportunities previously unavailable for those communities seeking to improve local economic conditions.

In the final paper, Jason Prno and Ben Bradshaw reflect on the centrality of Impact and Benefit Agreements (IBAs) utilized to manage and mitigate the impacts associated with mining operations on

Aboriginal lands. Asking the straightforward question — do IBAs work? — the authors explore whether or not Aboriginal communities benefit from these agreements. Concerned with the general lack of research on this issue, the authors tackle the thorny topic of engaging Aboriginal communities in research, whether the generated data truly reflects community-based attitudes, and how to employ these data to serve larger academic and industry research agendas. The authors suggest that the primary issue is methodological and that there is a need to create flexible interpretive frameworks to glean data from community members poorly versed in the complex language of academe and industry. Researchers are increasingly overwhelmed with demands for improved research methodologies stressing they engage Aboriginal people at the grassroots level. There is also a growing canon of literature proclaiming the benefits that indigenous knowledge has to offer to academic and industry research. This paper discussed the challenges associated with refining a protocol to guide future research endeavours seeking to examine the utility of IBAs, and should be applauded.