Project Overview and Purpose

Aboriginal communities in Canada today are undergoing a dramatic shift. More and more, the Aboriginal community has an urban dimension, as Aboriginal people take up residence in cities and towns, or move back and forth between urban areas and their traditional territories. The reality today is that the majority of Aboriginal people now reside off-reserve, in cities or in regional centres, and increasingly see urban centres as places to build community, fashion a life, and find ways to maintain and deepen distinct Aboriginal cultural modes. This is a demographic and social change that is not likely to be reversed.

The development of urban Aboriginal communities brings both serious challenges and tremendous opportunities for Aboriginal people. One of the most significant challenges is the economic well being of Aboriginal people in urban areas: while slightly better off than their counterpart's on-Reserve, they lag well behind non-Aboriginal people in labour force participation, income levels, and business development. For too many Aboriginal people, life in urban areas is a life constrained by limited economic opportunities.

But there is also a tremendous opportunity here to mobilize the skills, knowledge, and energies of Aboriginal people and connect them to the economic and labour market opportunities that exist in urban areas.

In order for Aboriginal communities to succeed in building economies in urban areas, they need access to the best available knowledge about what development strategies are effective, what programs make a difference, and how best to develop community capacity. And they also need an effective and supportive policy context that can enable community efforts to bear fruit.

Although there is a significant body of research on success factors in urban Aboriginal economic development and in building capacity in urban Aboriginal organizations, there is currently no national resource or network to share and exchange knowledge in this discipline.   This lack of knowledge sharing hinders urban Aboriginal economic growth while at the same time inhibiting the advancement of future research. Government policy also suffers, as policy development is not well connected to the creation of new knowledge or to community activities, and so remains unhelpful or irrelevant to those it is intended to help.

In order to address this, a number of researchers, community leaders, and policy analysts have initiated a project to develop a stronger national network on urban Aboriginal economic development. The project, funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council and Indian and Northern Affairs Canada, is intended to bring together practitioners, policy experts, researchers, and community leaders in a dialogue about urban Aboriginal economic development.

The intent of the dialogue is enable participants to share their knowledge and experience with each other, so that Aboriginal communities can benefit from current research, and researchers can more precisely identify what research would be seen as relevant or needed by communities and policy makers.   This National Network will involve scholars, practitioners, and others working in urban Aboriginal communities and organizations, universities, federal/ provincial/ municipal governments, private industry, and non-governmental organizations.

We believe that working together, we can build a strong national network that will enable more effective responses to the urgent economic development needs of urban Aboriginal communities.

Process:

Ottawa National Gathering:
The first step in the creation of this National Network is the two day Gathering in Ottawa, October 28th and 29th.   The Gathering is an opportunity for invited participants to begin to define the key issues and activities for the Network, and to give direction to the Steering Committee about Network activities.

We see the Network as a community of learners, a community that can grow to include as many as possible that are engaged in urban Aboriginal communities. We know everyone has valuable insight to contribute and we want to create a climate in which people feel free to make those contributions, and in which those contributions can be shared widely, and can influence practice, policy, and future research.

Learning Circles:
In order for this learning to proceed in an organized fashion, the Network will focus on 'Learning Circles'. Put simply, *Learning Circles* are focused discussions on particular issues, themes, or questions that participants agree are central. They are intended to be small group processes, with an open membership, and a relatively informal structure, a format that reflects traditional forms of dialogue amongst Aboriginal people in North America.   *Learning Circles* are the main mechanism for the exchange of knowledge, and the creation of relationships, that lies at the heart of this National Network.

One of the objectives of the Ottawa Workshop is to launch our first *Learning Circle*. As well, we hope that participants at the Workshop will learn the essentials in forming and sustaining *Learning Circles*, and help identify an initial list of issues to be considered in the *Learning Circle*.

The goal of the Network is to establish at least one *Learning Circle* in each of the seven urban areas included in our project. Each *Circle* will include from five to 10 participants, made up of practitioners, academics, and others.   *Learning Circles* are not expected to be static. As organizations have changing needs and practitioners changing interests, it is expected that *Circles* will grow, change, find new communities of interest, but continue to be connected. This network of connected *Learning Circles*, creates a collective voice for resources, builds social capital and supports the ultimate goal of community building. The *Learning Circles* are the key instrument of fostering network capacity and communities of interest.

Stories of Interest
To provide fresh ideas, 'stories of interest' will be compiled and brought to the *Circles*. Rather than a formal case study approach, we favor the simplified format of 'stories of interest'. Stories employ a narrative, which are a traditional tool for framing knowledge. Aboriginal people have used narratives to weave together diverse experiences, to reinterpret previous events, to anticipate future activities, and to impose meaning on unexpected happenings. Stories are interesting to read or listen to, and easy to learn from. Part of the power of this approach is that

stories are not held up as a prescription, or a direct comparison emphasizing some groups are doing *better than* others. Nor do the stories conform to *best practices* or '*success stories.*' We learn as much from failure as we do from success. These are important cultural considerations.

There are of course different kinds of stories, just as there are many different strategies for building the economies of urban Aboriginal communities.   Some types of stories that we might want to consider include:

Stories Supporting Business Start Up
We need to share knowledge and experience about this critical first step: getting started in the business world. Examples include Aboriginal business support centres assisting entrepreneurs with business start up, and non-profit societies operating social enterprises that employ the difficult to employ. Strategies differ as circumstances vary, and because they reflect the range of options, they become valuable stories for those with similar orientation.

Stories About Building Organizational Capacity
A key theme identified in the current discussions of Aboriginal economic development is organizational capacity to deliver services that support community or business development. Some organizations have skill building, training, and employment readiness as their mission, while others anchor their community development activities in cultural practices:

1. mentoring for leadership development
2. maximizing communications/participation
3. implementing a strategic approach
4. strengthening administrative abilities
5. developing relationships and partnerships

Stories From a Diversity of Regions and Aboriginal Communities Across Canada
Stories reflecting the cultural and geographical diversity of the country will be gathered. We would attempt to include stories from each of the regions of the country, and stories that reflected the experiences of First Nations, Métis, and Inuit.

The issues we think are important

We invite you to edit, contribute to or critique these questions. Each *Learning Circle* will be autonomous in deciding which questions they wish to pursue. We use this approach of listing questions to help to introduce the many facets of urban Aboriginal community economic development.

Some Questions From Academics
1. What are the limits to trying to identify success factors in economic or business development?
2. If Aboriginal communities or government funders wanted to move to an evidence-based approach, how should that be accomplished? What are the key indicators, and what tools are available to measure these?
3. What is the impact of economic development activities on community development, and vice versa?

4. What is the impact of specific government policies on economic development in urban Aboriginal communities?
5. What role does social capital play in supporting Aboriginal entrepreneurs? Is that social capital drawn from the Aboriginal community or the broader community, and does it matter what the source is? Are there different kinds of social capital involved?
6. In what way do activities associated with economic development reflect Aboriginal cultural practices, or norms and relationships that are unique to Aboriginal peoples
7. Do people use their connections to their traditional territories or home communities to support their economic or business activities?   Do land based communities draw on the capacities of their urban members?
8. What role do Aboriginal organizations play in the activities or aspirations of Aboriginal entrepreneurs, or community developers?

Some Questions From Practitioners
1. What can you accomplish with existing resources?
2. What are the institutions that support you in your work? These may include: Aboriginal Capital Corporations, business support centres, government agencies, urban councils, reserve-based resources. What is missing here and how can we improve the supports already offered?
3. What are the cultural practices you have built into your work place that 'fit' with traditional Aboriginal practices?
4. Are there specific human resource practices and procedures that have supported your work?
5. What are the creative ways you have been able to combine program dollars to fund a needed program?
6. How could others make use of this strategy of creative combinations of program dollars? How can they prepare and apply for these funds and who can they talk to?
7. How could funders work together to make these program dollars more effective and available to organizations?
8. What successful, working alliances already exist? How can new alliances and relationships between Aboriginal organizations be a source of information, resources, support, and collaboration?
9. Have you found ways to exercise sovereignty: become more independent, make your own decisions, less dependent on government money, and access to non-government resources?
10. What are the urban Aboriginal development models that others may employ?
11. What policy changes would make a difference?

We invite your feedback, and look forward to your participation in the Workshop, the *Learning Circles*, and the other Network Activities.