

Urban Aboriginal Economic Development National Network



Learning Circle on Developing the Urban Aboriginal Economy in Toronto

Prepared by the Urban Aboriginal Economic Development Network

March 2011

About the Urban Aboriginal Economic Development Network:

The Urban Aboriginal Economic Development (UAED) Network is an open and inclusive multi-stakeholder network of researchers and practitioners working in urban Aboriginal and Métis communities. This includes organizations; universities; federal, provincial, municipal, and Aboriginal governments; private industry; community groups; and NGOs. The network's focus is on mobilizing economic development knowledge and strengthening organizational capacity.

This paper can be found on the network website: <http://abdc.bc.ca/uaed>.

About the Ontario Federation of Indian Friendship Centres:

The *Ontario Federation of Indian Friendship Centres* (OFIFC) is a provincial Aboriginal organization representing the collective interests of twenty-nine member Friendship Centres located in towns and cities throughout the province. The OFIFC administers a number of programs which are delivered by local Friendship Centres in areas such as health, justice, family support, and employment and training. Friendship Centres also design and deliver local initiatives in areas such as education, economic development, children's and youth initiatives, and cultural awareness. The vision of the Aboriginal Friendship Centre Movement is "to improve the quality-of-life for Aboriginal people living in an urban environment by supporting self-determined activities which encourage equal access to and participation in Canadian Society and which respects Aboriginal cultural distinctiveness" (OFIFC. Accessed March 31, 2011. <http://www.ofifc.org/>).

Dr. Rochelle R. Côté:

Dr. Rochelle R. Côté is a *Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council* (SSHRC) Postdoctoral Research Fellow with the Udall Center for Studies in Public Policy at the University of Arizona. Formerly of the University of Toronto, her doctoral dissertation entitled "Making Their Way in the Mainstream: Indigenous Entrepreneurs, Social Capital and Performance in Toronto's Marketplace" focused on the link between social networks and the success of Indigenous business owners. She has written and presented on many aspects of social capital including support networks and acts of reciprocity, as well as the important topic of social tolerance for ethnic minorities. In a professional capacity, she has provided consulting expertise on matters related to the development of social networks and social capital for *The Social Research and Demonstration Corporation* (SRDC) as well as the *Policy Research Initiative* (PRI), *Aboriginal Policing Directorate*, and most recently the *Office of the Federal Interlocutor on Métis and Non-Status Indians*.

Her research interests include understanding the link between social tolerance and social networks and the use of social networks and cultural knowledge in negotiating business opportunities. She is currently examining the role of different forms of social and cultural capital in the business success of Indigenous entrepreneurs in Phoenix, Arizona.

An up-to-date Curriculum Vitae can be found at:

<http://utoronto.academia.edu/RochelleCote/CurriculumVitae>.

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Introduction

The Toronto Learning Circle was organized by the UAED Network, in cooperation with the OFIFC and Dr. Rochelle Côté, Principal Investigator for the Aboriginal Entrepreneurship in and around Toronto Project.

The participants were told that the purpose of the Circle was to strengthen the capacity of Aboriginal people in Toronto to develop, implement, and sustain economic development opportunities and partnerships in their communities.

The overall goal of the Community Learning Circles, which this Circle will be a part of, is to develop a Canada-wide advocacy network that supports the economic development of Aboriginal people in urban areas.

Invitation

Urban Aboriginal Economic Development

Dear Colleague:

We are inviting you to a ½ day Learning Circle on “*Developing the Urban Aboriginal Economy in Toronto*” on March 22nd, 2011.

The Circle is an ancient form of meeting that has gathered human beings into respectful conversation for thousands of years. The Circle has served as the foundation for many cultures. What transforms a meeting into a Learning Circle is the willingness of people to shift from informal socializing or opinionated discussion into a receptive attitude of thoughtful speaking and deep listening. The purpose of this Circle is to strengthen the capacity of Aboriginal people in the Toronto area to implement and sustain economic development opportunities and partnerships in the community.

We know that Aboriginal people looking to create a business face numerous challenges. But research shows that one of the best assets we can bring to starting a business is the strength and support Aboriginal people draw from their social networks and community. The Learning Circle is intended to help develop a network for Aboriginal people interested in economic development in urban areas.

This Circle is also intended to mobilize knowledge on this important issue. We are therefore inviting researchers, practitioners, and policy analysts to participate, in the belief that each of these three audiences has important knowledge about urban economic development to share with others.

This Circle is intended as a first step: if participants see value, they can continue to meet and add other resource people to the group. The hope would be that the on-going group will build the needed supports for Aboriginal people starting up and sustaining business and social enterprises, assist policy analysts in identifying policy barriers to success, and give practitioners additional tools and understandings that can strengthen their practice.

We hope you will join the Circle. If you want to include yourself or want more information, please contact Laura Blumhagen, who is coordinating this event in your community.

Location: Ontario Federation of Indian Friendship Centres, 219 Front Street East

Time: 9:00 am – 12:00 pm

Laura can be contacted at (250) 562-6325, or by email at uaed@abdc.bc.ca.

Sincerely,

Charles Horn, Rochelle Côté, and Jena Weber

Participants

The following people attended the Learning Circle:

- Lee Ahenakew
- K. Jake Chakasim
- Errington Charlton
- Rochelle Côté
- Jean Guy Fricchette
- Tamara Gates
- Ronald Green
- Zack Gutfreund
- Jessica Hill
- Candice Holmstrom
- Charles Horn
- Tim Krahn
- Cynthia Lickers-Sage
- Monica McKay
- Linda Peart
- Tim Pile
- Gerry Quackenbush
- Stephen Scott
- Andrew Szonyi
- Natiea Vinson
- Jena Weber

Learning Circle Notes

The meeting was held at the OFIFC boardroom on March 22nd, 2011. Rochelle Côté and Jena Weber co-hosted the Circle and helped to organize the meeting.

The meeting itself started with an opening prayer. Somebody put a sacred item in the center of the Circle (a smudge kit). We had a round of introductions to get to know each other. Charles introduced and discussed with the group some background information about Learning Circles and then posted the following guidelines on the wall for all of the participants to see:

- Learn about one another – become familiar.
- Listen carefully – make notes to focus on listening.
- Take your turn – it is important that everyone is heard.
- Help keep the discussion on topic.
- Address remarks to the group not the facilitator.
- Let the facilitator know if the Circle is not working for you.
- Take part – everyone has unique experience and knowledge.
- Engage in friendly disagreement – challenge ideas.
- Respect all opinions.
- Humour helps.

Over the following three hours, Charles asked the groups three questions:

1. What are the major assets that the community brings to the table?
2. Where do we need to go? And what do we need to know to get there?
3. What is the point of a second meeting?

What are the major assets that the community brings to the table?

The group began the discussion by establishing that political correctness was irrelevant, and participants were free to not censor their thoughts. The following ideas reflect the contributions and thoughts of Circle participants with regards to community assets:

Toronto as a “market”:

- Is a hub of economic activity,
- Provides a broad spectrum of directly accessible opportunities,
- Facilitates face-to-face interaction,
- Has a tourism market,
- Provides opportunities for improved networking, and
- Offers a wide range of education possibilities.

One of the participants stated that one of the major assets that the Aboriginal community in Toronto brings to the table is “a market”, since the urban environment itself is a market. This idea of the urban market as an asset appealed to a number of participants, and it was also mentioned that, as one of the largest Canadian cities and a hub of economic activity, Toronto has more to offer than most other places in Canada. Some participants felt that people living in the Greater Toronto Area have an advantage because they have more access to opportunities and more face-to-face time.

Toronto as a location is an asset as it provides resources and opportunities and facilitates important face-to-face interaction. Tourism was identified as one of the market opportunities. The development of a Cultural Centre would create opportunities for artists and entrepreneurs to engage the public. Generally, the community needs to be more effective in networking, interacting, and coordinating business activities with mainstream businesses. We are a part of this greater economy and need to explore our opportunities. The Calgary Chamber of Commerce, for example, has an Aboriginal Opportunities Program. Other participants agreed that access to contacts in mainstream economic community is extremely important. Their experience and opinion was that, while education and access to capital are important, active networking with the mainstream economy leads to higher sales and higher incomes.

Social and human capacity:

As another asset of Toronto’s Aboriginal community Circle participants identified social and human capacity. In this context, the following advantages and key needs were discussed:

- Connectivity,
- Large pool of human resources in one location,
- Embracing diversity,
- Partnerships, and
- Networking venues.

Another participant questioned how urban community members can tap into technological resources and fully take advantage of and build connectivity within the

community and with the rest of the world. While the Aboriginal connection to the land is often seen in as exclusively rural, the group introduced a different interpretation. The physical presence of the people in the city is an asset to the community. Someone held that the focus should be on young women who have left their communities. Toronto embraces diversity. There are lots of opportunities but the community is fractured. Instead of working together, Circle participants perceived a lot of community-internal fighting.

Furthermore, participants commented on the value of the human resource base as the community's biggest asset. In metropolitan settings like Toronto, a community naturally has a big pool of human capacity to draw from. The Circle stressed the importance of taking advantage of this asset through partnerships. Participants also felt that there is a need for more active engagement, interaction, and communication between community members. Entrepreneurs in Toronto, reportedly, are quite disconnected, and Circle participants pointed out that having one designated location or venue where entrepreneurs can be brought together would facilitate networking in the community. Not everyone agreed right away, qualifying that there is "no need for a fancy place to meet". Instead, the focus should be on human interaction and information exchange. Incubator models, especially for young urban Natives, should be investigated. By providing the infrastructure, new opportunities open up. Someone else knew about a place for rent (Spadina) which offers inexpensive desks, free Wi-Fi, and an environment for starting business and networking activities.

Education and mentoring:

A third group of assets focused on education and mentoring. Participants listed the following infrastructural and social advantages and needs:

- Education through access to universities and other educational facilities,
- Support individuals in their aspirations,
- Allow for "meandering paths",
- Mentor and nurture youth, and
- Recognize talent in the community.

Another community asset, which is closely linked building human resources, is education. The Toronto Aboriginal community has access to several universities and other post-secondary educational facilities. Universities create great spaces for people to be creative. Circle participants voiced the need for encouragement to let individuals give back to their community throughout their learning journey.

Aboriginal learners take an average of seven years to complete their education. They have a meandering path. University levels are declining, while college levels are increasing. We need to address community needs in order to develop our assets. This can include support for Aboriginal learners but also support for their spouses and children. Everyone should be allowed to make mistakes and learn from them.

Following the introduction of universities and education as a community asset, other participants found that the focus on economic development should be with youth. Beyond

formal education, youth need to be nurtured and mentored. The Circle stressed that there is a lot of talent in the community. In order for this talent to be fruitful, the community needs to come together and cooperate to sustain creativity and growth.

The fact that the youth population is expanding was listed as an asset as well. Nurturing and mentoring youth should also focus on building leadership and resilience. Youth achievements should be recognized and acknowledged. Some participants felt that, in this field, the Aboriginal support organizations are competing with each other rather than working together. Mentorship and personal growth for the youth was seen to be very important by many participants, and to fully build this asset, youth need support. The Go Forth Institute was named as a positive example of mentoring and entrepreneurial training. But it was also stressed that beyond focusing efforts on youth, the 55+ generation needs supports and are also a valuable human capacity asset.

In the context of education, training, and entrepreneurial support, one participant cautioned that not everybody is meant to be an entrepreneur. It is important to take care of those without entrepreneurial talents or aspirations. If people are pushed into business against their talents or lifestyle choices, it may easily doom them to failure, discourage them, and leave their true talents untapped.

Government and organizational supports:

Finally, the discussion moved to governance and organizational assets and principles of the Aboriginal community of Toronto. Discussion points included:

- Facilitation of access to market, capital, and leadership;
- Promotion of funding and support opportunities; and
- Encouragement to rely less on government and other outside supports.

One comment identified that access to market, financing, and political leadership can be problematic, and it is often difficult to get dollars and trust. However, some Circle participants shared that there are a lot of opportunities for funding, but that there is not enough information available to those who seek these opportunities. In addition, procedures to access funding can be very complicated and discouraging at times. Someone commented that, while American entrepreneurs tend to “run the show”, Canadian entrepreneurs are more prone to rely on government support and complicated application procedures.

Where do we need to go? What do we need to know to get there?

The next step in the Learning Circle discussion aimed to identify goals and necessary steps to achieving those goals. Participants listed a number of tools and development paths that build assets and have the potential to help the community overcome some of the obstacles.

Many ideas revolved around providing education, training, and supports to increase community members' employability and enable them to fully participate in the labour market. For young Aboriginal men, a general focus on trades was suggested. Someone voiced a need to better engage male learners in learning activities and participation in the economy. Many Aboriginal learners face issues in the education system. The community needs to partner with educational institutions and the mainstream community to address those issues. In a process of improving the Aboriginal learning experience and economic development, the community should be willing to build on smaller successes. Solutions may not be easy and straightforward, and multi-layered approaches might hold some answers to that.

Literacy and numeracy supports are an important step. Supporters have to adapt the service delivery to the group that needs it. The wisdom of Elders and a life-long learning approach should be better reflected. One participant emphasized the need for the community to work together and take a team approach. How can this be achieved?

Currently, participants felt that there is a lack of people taking advantage of post-secondary institutions. As a result, businesses are “missing the boat”, missing out on resource opportunities and potential partnerships. Another participant shared her/his inspiration from a commercial that encourages turning one's passion into a career and turning one's skills into a business. This message needs to be better communicated to the community at large.

Some platforms, organizations, and tools that can be used by the Toronto Aboriginal community included the *Canadian Council for Aboriginal Business* (CCAB) as a great platform for entrepreneurs and the *Centre for Aboriginal Entrepreneurship Research* in Ryerson. Moreover, the creation of “Centers of Aboriginal Business Excellence” and a workplan with the City of Toronto to strategize Aboriginal economic development were suggested by Circle participants.

In summary:

Participants identified several needs and actions for next steps and as stepping stones towards sustainable urban Aboriginal economic development in Toronto. With a strong focus on capacity building, the discussion included the following:

- Education and training supports;
- Literacy and numeracy;
- Life-long learning;
- Education, training, and employment supports for young Aboriginal men;

- Partnerships to improve education by incorporating Elders and traditional wisdom, through team work, and through multi-layered approaches;
- Building on small successes;
- Encouraging and promoting post-secondary education opportunities;
- Inspiring careers and creating confidence;
- Promoting CCAB as a great platform for entrepreneurs;
- Creating Centres for Aboriginal Business Excellence; and
- Establishing a workplan with the City of Toronto.

What priorities can we focus on immediately to move things forward?

In this session, the Circle prioritized ideas and identified short-term and immediate actions in order to find a starting point in urban Aboriginal economic development in Toronto. Throughout the discussion, participants cautioned each other to stay focused on Toronto, not to assume that one solution will fit all levels from national, to regional, urban, and rural. Furthermore, an even more specific focus on individual projects was suggested as a starting point for any economic development strategy. A narrow focus and reachable goals are more productive than attempts to address global issues.

Someone suggested establishing of support mechanisms to help individuals transform their existing skills and talents into business activities. One way of organizing such supports would be to create business enterprise organizations in the Greater Toronto Area. Developing better information sharing mechanisms, especially about access to supports, was identified as critically important.

The Aboriginal business community in Toronto and area is perceived as fragmented. It would help to have an urban Aboriginal business association for Aboriginal entrepreneurs and to create a sense of community and buy-in. Other ethnic groups demonstrate how this can work in various business associations, such as the Chinese and the Vietnamese Business Associations. Closely connected to overcoming fragmentation is the need to create a point of contact to get entrepreneurs more connected. All elements of the community have to be brought together. Circle participants thought that this is achievable.

Participants expressed the need to separate politics from business development. As a collective, the community should have enough power to convince organizations and governments to come together with a common focus on economic development. This would have the potential to create a point of contact and an access point for individuals. Institutions should serve as economic drivers. One recommendation was to explore ways of using existing infrastructure to foster efficiency in economic development and pursue supports.

Formal mechanisms could also facilitate meetings between successful role models and new entrepreneurs. Inspirational success stories have to be shared, and people need to see 'real people' who have turned their passions and skills into successful business ideas. Moreover, it is important to broaden the scope to a larger pool of people to work with. Finally, sustainable economic development should be open to other communities and cultures in order to be successful.

In summary:

In identifying immediate priorities, Learning Circle participants provided several recommendations, including:

- Stay focused on Toronto and do not assume that the same solutions apply for national, regional, urban, and rural areas;
- Narrow the focus on specific projects;

- Enhance information sharing mechanisms to facilitate the use of existing skills for business development;
- Look into forming an umbrella organization to unite the fragmented urban Aboriginal economic development community;
- Find a way to separate political pressures associated with organizations and governments from economic development;
- Facilitate interaction between Aboriginal businesses and municipal governments;
- Use institutions as economic drivers;
- Look into ways of using existing infrastructure to provide supports and enhance economic efficiency;
- Share successes and provide role models; and
- Be open to other cultures and approaches.

A second meeting?

The last part of this Learning Circle established whether the format of the Circle and the product of participant interaction were perceived as useful and whether a follow-up Circle would be necessary and helpful. Participants agreed that there is a need for a follow-up meeting. It is important to initiate cooperation among organizations with the capacity to support and to take ownership of initiatives. Participants suggested inviting the City of Toronto and/or their Aboriginal Advisory Group to participate in a follow-up Learning Circle.

The second meeting will be more strategic and explore the incubator model in more detail. A non-partisan organization needs to develop an inventory of ideas, models, steps, issues, and solutions. The group will then delineate the next steps after the inventory is completed. Other organizations who should be engaged include CCAB, INAC, colleges, universities, and the Ministry of Research and Innovation.