

Urban Aboriginal Economic Development National Network



Learning Circle on Small Town Governance

About the Urban Aboriginal Economic Development National Network:

The Urban Aboriginal Economic Development (UAED) National 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>.

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Learning Circle on Small Town Governance

John's Comment:

Let's keep this topic bubbling on the stove.

Some History:

First we had a very lively discussion at our November gathering, followed by some notes I sent around. That was followed by Milt's comments which I thought to be penetrating in so many ways. I believe his comments were included and sent around, but without comment if I remember correctly. I have returned to the document, left most of Milt's comments following the word "Comment:" and ask you to consider the next steps.

Urban Aboriginal communities are not going away.
They are working to be robust, politically effective, and autonomous.

Don's Comment:

The assumption that we are making (correct in my view) is that urban Aboriginal people are not being adequately represented through existing mechanisms. Existing mechanisms are the four levels of government that Aboriginal people must currently depend on for 'constitutional' representation: federal, reserve, provincial, and municipal. We have noted that this is problematic when one considers that urban Aboriginals are 'minorities' in three of these governments. We have to talk about the fact that reserve or nation governments are for the most part focused on the issues facing them on reserve and that little capital (financial or political) is spent on the members living off reserve.

On top of this is a labyrinth of 'theme' or 'need' based representation. This includes the many groups that we are familiar with. The fundamental issue that this group must grapple with is: if you are going to talk about governance, who is it that you are purporting to govern? Our discussions (as noted by Milt) led us to the concept of governance as a 'noun' rather than a verb. We are, however, still faced with the issue of who is being governed or represented, and do they desire to be governed or represented. My feeling is that we are really moving in the direction of legitimate advocacy rather than representation in the formal sense.

As Milt noted, "Service providers are necessarily aligned toward mutually shared sets of outcomes, but they are still self-interested and mandated by their Boards." I think that this touches on a very important issue. Is it practical to create an umbrella organization that has at its roots groups who are "self interested". Any model would have to have the ability to reflect the diversity of the Urban Aboriginal Community UAC (i.e. people not needs).

As Peters noted, there are currently a few organizations that unofficially fill the advocacy role, most notably the Friendship Centres across Canada. While this may not be what we advocate for in the end, it is a useful case study as the Friendship Centres tend to be involved in a wide range of issues facing urban Aboriginal people.

Definitions

Urban Aboriginal communities can be defined by their needs, by their interests (in a brighter future), and by their providers.
What we need is a vision of a positive future.

Don's Comment:

My notes indicate that we felt that too often UAC were defined solely by their perceived needs and not by the people (including their individual and collective assets) who are members of those communities and the challenges to on reserve governments that this creates.

The big question is how do we define ourselves?

- Are we a movement (collective) engaging a community of interest, intent on growing our independence?
- Are we just service organizations that simply provide services?
- Are we individuals who have opted out of an urban native identity?

Analogy of the present governance and its players

30,000 ft. level: we have advocacy and representation by those who are at best uniformed and at worst disinterested in the urban community– First Nations Leadership Council.

20,000 ft. level: we have providers, experts, and folks who can at least see the ground, but who only represent their respective communities of interest.

Ground level: There are needs of the community, of which the discussion is “thin” and nobody works in a collective way to meet these needs. The urban Aboriginal constituency has little to no access to decision makers.

Don's Comment:

Evelyn Peters made the observation that the size of the urban community does matter. This is important to keep in mind while going forward. One can speculate that larger metropolitan centres are apt to have large and more diverse Aboriginal populations (less cohesion around Milt's point of 'Nation') rather than more cohesive smaller communities. We made an attempt at this while exploring our 30,000' discussion (I believe that we even inserted a 25,000' level to address this).

Milt's Comment:

I don't think service providers are necessarily aligned toward mutually shared set of outcomes – they are still self-interested and mandated by their Boards at the end of the day.

'Advocacy' means:
Who are we as a people?
What principles do we operate under?

Milt's Comment:

The articulation of Indigenous citizenship is done by the wrong people. They focus on what happens on reserve. In my experience, those First Nations who are speaking in terms of citizenship are doing so in the much wider context of nationhood (s. 35 of the Constitution) not reserve (Indian Act). They speak of their people as citizens regardless of whether they are on their territory or not. Their context is Indigenous rights and territory. This approach, governance as a noun is killing us. Governance as a verb, means organizing. This is what the Métis are doing. They focus on place, not land. From an urban perspective, thinking about 'governance' as the noun, 'government' is what becomes confusing. Thinking about 'governance' as a verb in the context of organizing is easier to grasp.

What kind of governance model are we looking for?

Don's Comment:

I think that rather than 'models' we need to think about an advocacy approach to this issue.

Milt's Comment:

Pursuing a 'model' may prove problematic, when from my perspective I am not convinced that 'urban' is a governable place/space and wonder if urban folks are not anxious to see themselves as being governed. In the end, urban Aboriginal people may not be governable in the conventional sense of that word.

Don's Comment:

As I noted above, I think that we are not talking about 'governance of', but rather 'advocacy on the behalf of' urban Aboriginal peoples. I think that this is an important distinction that will help us to get past some of the more 'sticky' philosophical and political problems that emerge when one starts talking about governance.

The UBCM model started as advocacy – membership lends legitimacy and over time this creates de facto jurisdiction and authority. It has distinctive parts, is a government body that does advocacy, has legitimacy, and the Premier and cabinet members show up which gives its members access.

I believe the UBCM is an organization as opposed to a government body. But it has practiced 'governance' by being a collection of municipalities that have been organized.

Don's Comment:

The reason that I brought this up was precisely because the UBCM is not a governing body. One can think of it as a collection of 'service providers' who have their own unique view of the world at an individual level who join together to fulfill a broader function of representing municipalities in general to higher levels of government. This does not prevent individual municipalities from seeking funding, policy change, etc. What it does do is allow these communities to scale up to a level where they can have more influence on higher levels of government than they would have had trying to act individually.

The First Nations Summit and the Union of BC Indian Chiefs are also mechanisms that are not unlike the UBCM. There is also perhaps the problem of too many competing groups versus the singular and inclusive UBCM approach.

There are different models for different communities. For example, Neskonlith Indian Band would be an integral part of any urban governance structure in Chase, B.C.

The Urban Aboriginal Economy:

It is essential to understand the flow of money around the loop from urban to reserve communities, and back again.

Milt's Comment:

I also think it important to state that the economy is not about place, it is addressing needs with supplies. So while service organizations are dealing with the needs of the urban community, that's not economic development per se.

Don's Comment:

Our work over the last decade has really pointed out that the reason most economic development strategies fail (almost all of the successes that I have had

pointed out to me by government are to do with the world price of commodities and not some grand economic development strategy) is that they are too narrowly focused on economic development and fail to acknowledge a community's capacities or lack thereof. Equipping communities to benefit from economies is/should be the focus, thus the need for broader community development.

Community development supports the development of an urban Aboriginal economy through:

- Business supports and
- Capacity building.

Prince George Strategy

Look back, in an appreciative inquiry approach, to describe why it changed. Restart the UAS. How do we take the good ideas and turn them into action? The strategy is to get community buy in about the future of urban Aboriginal people.

Milt's Comment:

The Urban Aboriginal Strategy is still playing out in PG, albeit with a different ensemble cast and new musical score.

Don's Comment:

The comment that came out of the meeting really centred on the fact that the UAS meetings in PG attracted a large number of community people who did not normally attend such functions (as part of the 30,000 ft. discussion it was noted that service providers attend meetings as a form of 'self preservation' while 'ordinary' community members seldom attend). The problem (a re-occurring theme) is how do you encourage the wider UAC to participate and continue to take time out of their busy lives to participate. While service providers are motivated by the fear of 'missing out', what would motivate the wider UAC to participate and continue to be engaged? With the day to day pressures of life, do you think that the majority of non-service providers want to be engaged?

Again, I think that what we are really talking about is coordinating advocacy for Aboriginals living in urban centres.

Follow Up Actions

1. Who are the people we should pull into the conversation? Paul LeCerte, Chris Robertson suggested person from Pemberton: name? Others I missed?
2. Where do we meet next, or will it be a conference call?
3. There needs to be an opportunity to define the model and to test-drive it.

4. Perhaps looking for a model is a mistake as Milt suggests.
5. We need more information and it was suggested that we look at a call for proposals that would include:
 - An overview paper on relationships and advocacy.
 - The 30,000 ft analogy – outlining the challenge.
 - Don: While I find this interesting I do not think that it is worth too much of our time. What we are looking at is how to provide a vehicle for policy makers and the broader UAC to connect in a meaningful way.
 - The ground level description.
 - The 20,000 ft. elevation and the case studies of the UAS and the Aboriginal Education Board.
 - Don: I think that these two pieces are very important to help us with our discussion paper. The Aboriginal school piece from PG would be especially helpful because it encompasses issues of ‘interest groups’ and ‘individuals’.
 - Governance or organizing paper as suggested by Milt.

Don’s Comment:

I think that prior to a paper on relationships and advocacy it would be useful to create an asset map of organizations and contacts that may already be providing for the broader advocacy. We then would need to have a review of existing positive examples of how urban Aboriginal groups and individuals ‘scale up’ to provide meaningful and coherent advocacy (or lack thereof) from across Canada. This would need to include a literature review as well. Evelyn Peters touches briefly on this in the bibliography, but I am sure there is a great deal more out there.

For our purposes, it should concentrate on Canadian examples. Foreign examples are interesting, but given our political and constitutional uniqueness, we need to know what works, or not, here. I think that this is a really important piece that needs to be done before we delve more into creating our own model.

I think that, with the above in place, we could then develop a discussion paper that would allow us to put together a framework for “Urban Aboriginal Organizing”. This should give us a firm foundation for policy discussions that we would like to have in Ottawa.

Some other questions include:

The question arose about what is the UAC’s relationship to the wider non-First Nation community. I would add to this the question of what is the UAC’s relationship to the ‘nations’ and to other levels of government. We had a long discussion on how the main focus of the last several decades was land-based and thus reserve-based. We do need to have a stronger case on having to get past the

status quo. This is where we started to have the discussion of place-based theory and how it could be a more useful way of understanding people's relationship to their community.

There is also the question of how 'non-attached' individuals connect to the UAC? This is really a community engagement piece that goes to the point of how do you get people involved and keep them involved.

The timing Greg suggested is contract these to various universities in December, and in six months, when we can bring the pieces together, to be printed and posted. We have already indicated support for Bettina writing the Regina model. It may be Aboriginal Housing or it could centre on the food bank complex.

Milt's Comment:

I had suggested that a research paper be undertaken on the notion of Urban Aboriginal Governance. From that paper a 5-8 page draft discussion framework for "Governance" or for "Urban Aboriginal Organizing" can be created. The draft can be presented and circulated to interest groups for their feedback. The draft would be adjusted to reflect those interests. Circulating it in advance to Aboriginal interest groups, on the basis of receiving their input, also helps with building awareness and support for whatever eventual outcome may emerge.