

## Urban Aboriginal Economic Development Network

### Learning Circle on Small Town Governance Summary of Discussion, November 04, 2009

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

- November 04, 2009, roundtable participant

The assumption that we are making 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 talked 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 available to be spent on the members living off reserve. We also need to consider that a large percentage of the urban Aboriginal people are either Metis or non-status Indians and not connected to reserve or nation governments.

In addition to constituted representation 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 led us to the problem, 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, to what purpose is the process of governance representation directed, and do these people desire to be governed or represented.

As noted: in the discussions “Service providers are necessarily aligned toward a mutually shared set of outcomes – they are still self-interested and mandated by their Boards”. This touches on a very important issue. Is it practical to create an umbrella governance 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). People not needs.

Evelyn Peters noted in her Urban Aboriginal Economic Development Network (UAED) discussion paper that there are currently a few organizations that unofficially fill an advocacy role. Most notable among these is the network of 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. It was noted that we need to be cognisant of the issue that Friendship Centres are by necessity still “self interested”.

### **Definition**

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

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 a collection of service organizations that simply provide services?
- Are we individuals who have opted out of an urban Aboriginal identity?

**Analogy of the present governance and its players:**

- a) At 30,000 ft we have advocacy and representation by those who are at best uniformed and at worst disinterested.
- b) At ground level we have providers, experts, and folks who represent their respective communities of interest.

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 and multiple points from which separate interests can pull in different directions) than more cohesive smaller communities. We made an attempt at this while exploring our 30,000 ft. level discussion, we even inserted a 25,000 ft. level to address this.

- c) 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.

**Advocacy means:**

- Who are we as a people? and
- What are the principles under which we may be able to come together and operate under?

It was noted that First Nations who are speaking in terms of citizenship are doing so in the much wider context of nationhood (under the Constitution Act) not reserve (Indian Act). They speak of their people as citizens regardless of whether they are on territory or not. Their context is linked to 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 and people. 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?**

We may have to think that rather than ‘models’ we need to think about an advocacy approach to this issue. We are not talking about governance of, rather advocacy on the behalf of urban Aboriginal peoples. 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 Union of British Columbia Municipalities (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 to its annual meetings which gives its members access. The UBCM is an organization as opposed to a government body. But it has practiced “governance” by being a collection of municipalities that have organized. One can think of it as a collection of ‘service providers’ who have their own unique view of the world at an individual level but who join together to fulfill a broader function of representing their collective interests 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. While the discussion summary to this point has included people who live at a distance from their reserve/nation homeland; urban places also contain local land-based Aboriginal peoples. 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 places to reserve communities, and back again.

Work over the last decade has really pointed out that the reason most economic development strategies fail 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. In other words, urban Aboriginal economic development means being attentive to both economic and social matters.

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

- Business supports, and
- Capacity building

### **Prince George Urban Aboriginal Strategy (UAS)**

If we were to look back, in an appreciative inquiry approach, to describe why it changed, how would we 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.

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 30,000ft. level discussion it was noted that service providers attend meetings as a form of self preservation' while 'ordinary' community members seldom attend). The problem (a reoccurring 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-today pressures of life, do you think that the majority of non- service providers want to be engaged?

1. Who are the people we should pull into the conversation?
2. There needs to be opportunities to define the model and to test drive it.
3. Need to consider that perhaps looking for a model is a mistake.
4. We need more information, and it was suggested that we look at a call for proposals that would include:
  - An overview paper on the core concepts of relationships and advocacy
  - The case studies of the UAS, and the Aboriginal Education Board.

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 there of) from across Canada. This would need to include a literature review as well. Evelyn Peters' touches briefly on this in the bibliography to her UAED report, but 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. This is a really important piece that needs to be done before we delve more into creating our own model.

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:**

The question arose about what is the UAC’s relationship to the wider non Aboriginal community. Add to this is 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.

An addition from John’s Harvard study paper:

“Our UAED Network project is interested in whether the emerging urban councils can effectively address urban Aboriginal community and economic development issues and opportunities. Could ‘metro councils’ in large cities become effective governance bodies given the breath of Aboriginal activities they encompass? Alternately, could urban-based Friendship Centres, or similar non-profit organizations or groupings other than metro councils, also provide options for effective governance institutions? “