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Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples **A Summary of Urban Aboriginal Economic Development (UAED) Aspects**

Introduction

The *Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples* (The Report) was published in 1996. The Royal Commission gathered testimony from Aboriginal people across Canada concerning all aspects of their lives with the intention of creating and improving the general understanding of what it means to be Aboriginal and in order to transform the relationship between Aboriginal nations and governments. The term 'Aboriginal' as used in *The Report* includes First Nations, Inuit, and Métis. The approach employed by the Royal Commission is to address specific aspects of Aboriginal life, present information and opinions, and make recommendations as to how the government or non-Aboriginal society should contribute to solving problems or improving the *status quo*. All propositions are made with a strong emphasis on the need for holistic solutions. UAED is not a chapter of its own, it is however included and cross-referenced in chapters on "Economic Development", "Urban Perspectives", and "Governance", as these topics are closely related to UAED.

Aboriginal Economic Development

The main finding concerning economic development is the recognition that a reliable economic base is crucial to any form of self-government, and moreover, critical to enabling Aboriginal communities to heal from the impacts of colonization. It is, therefore, an important step on Canadian Aboriginal Peoples' ways to becoming independent, self-sufficient nations within Canada. Economic development is also considered one of four pillars which are to support a renewed relationship between Aboriginal peoples and non-Aboriginal people. The Royal Commission emphasizes the importance of a culturally sensitive way of supporting collective communities as opposed to individuals in their pursuit of economic development and growth. In order to find remedies and effect change, policy-makers as well as the general public have to understand the roots and causes of economic marginalization as experienced by Aboriginal people. The limitation of land and resource access through colonization processes has undermined the main components of traditional Aboriginal economies. According to *The Report*, land and resource access, as well as recognition of treaties and comprehensive land claims, are

vital to Aboriginal economic development. One recommendation is to learn from successful examples of Aboriginal individual, community, or national entrepreneurship. Some of these business examples have led to improved service delivery in the form of access to financial and educational support for entire communities or individual community members. The Royal Commission notes some improvements in institutional support for education and training as well as business growth, especially an increase in women's businesses, and in entrepreneurial activities in urban areas.

Urban Aboriginal Communities

Specifically 'urban' aspects of Aboriginal life and economic development are presented in both the "Economic Development" and "Urban Perspectives" chapters. Before *The Report*, little attention was paid to urban Aboriginal issues in general, and the Royal Commission's analyses and recommendations reflect a continuing lack of distinction between urban and non-urban situations in the research and initiatives upon which it drew guidance. However, the authors of *The Report* acknowledge that the urban setting is a distinct situation for Aboriginal people, which calls for solutions and approaches specifically tailored to urban Aboriginal socio-economic challenges.

The urban Aboriginal population is growing, and statistics show a lack of education, high unemployment rates, and low income for Aboriginals compared to the non-Aboriginal urban population. *The Report* goes further and lists sub-groups who seem to be at the greatest disadvantage, especially single parent families headed by women. The physical distance to their original communities and the question of jurisdictional responsibility for the urban Aboriginal community, which features a multitude of cultural origins, create fundamental problems in service requirements and delivery. One of the main problems arising from this situation is an identity crisis for individuals. They find themselves between cultures and often feel that they have to decide which one they want to belong to. Instead of facing assimilation, however, they have to be enabled to find their place within the Euro-Canadian mainstream society in combination with their own Aboriginal cultural identity or roots. In urban settings, cultural support and connections to communities are essential to maintaining a distinct cultural identity and cope with urban life. The general consensus is that urban Aboriginals want to participate fully in the urban life of the dominant society, while honouring and living their own cultural heritage.

Barriers to UAED

There are a number of legislative, institutional, and social obstacles and barriers which need to be overcome in order to succeed in UAED. A list of obstacles frequently faced by Aboriginal people features insufficient numbers of available jobs, a discrepancy between Aboriginal skills and labour market demands, social and systemic racism, and a lack of childcare facilities. Due to large numbers of Aboriginal peoples moving into Canadian cities, urban labour markets are unable to absorb the rapidly growing Aboriginal labour force. In addition, existing jobs are less likely to be given to Aboriginal job seekers based on racism and stereotypes that reach from individual employers and co-workers' attitudes to systemic discrimination in school curricula, historical and social literature, and administration and law enforcement. Racism can take on many forms in different settings, all of which have a strong, negative impact on urban Aboriginal people and their economic development. The Royal

Commission includes childcare issues in its examinations and recommendations. Given that Aboriginal single parent women make up a large percentage of the urban Aboriginal population and are statistically likely to live in poverty, culturally-appropriate, affordable childcare is essential to their economic development and active participation in the labour force. *The Report* furthermore calls for improvements to education and job training as adequate preparation for the expected growing numbers of urban migrants.

Other obstacles on the way to successful UAED become evident in the Royal Commission's elaborations on traditional Aboriginal economies and the hopes of resurgence of some of them in the future. They repeatedly stress the importance of a land base, control over traditional territories, access to natural resources, and the recognition of economic and resource provisions in treaties. These economic features are unavailable to most urban Aboriginal populations. This means that they have to find other economic areas to get involved in without compromising their cultural origins. One of the great jurisdictional challenges for urban Aboriginal populations is the fact that they are communities of interest with diverse cultural and territorial origins. They often lack organization, representation, and recognition as a community. The Royal Commission addresses this challenge in the "Governance" chapter.

Culturally Appropriate Measures

The Report emphasizes the need for culturally appropriate measures in order to improve Aboriginal life in Canada in general and individual aspects such as UAED. One main aspect of culturally appropriate approaches is Aboriginal control. Whether it is self-government on a higher level or control over service delivery, education, or other institutions and initiatives on a local level, distinct Aboriginal cultures call for distinct Aboriginal solutions and organizational structures. This control enables them to respond to the needs of their communities and gives them recognition as peoples.

The main theme of the distinct cultural elements to be considered in appropriate service delivery is 'community'. Communal approaches leave room for central elements of Aboriginal cultures such as learning from each other and passing on knowledge over generations, relying on family support networks, embracing ceremonial and social aspects of one's culture, and the formation of a cultural identity as part of a group. The emphasis on 'holistic' concepts follows similar principles. One major problem of service delivery in urban areas is the individualization of members of the Aboriginal community, which is easily adopted in urban settings and has proven to be counterproductive.

The Royal Commission identifies not only the individualization of the urban Aboriginal community but also the fragmentation of services in urban settings as one major barrier to positive UAED. All aspects of Aboriginal life should be acknowledged and integrated in programs and initiatives. This translates to dealing with health, housing, social services, education and training, and employment services in one setting because they all influence each other. Community development and UAED cannot be successful if only one problem is addressed at a time. Their suggestion is to establish institutions which deliver all services related to socio-economic aspects of urban Aboriginal life. Three important principles are to be integrated in this kind of support: aim social assistance at broad community development goals, adopt a holistic approach considering overall community well-being, and ensure Aboriginal control over services to guarantee culturally appropriate approaches and services.

The Royal Commission identifies urban Friendship Centres as apt institutions to carry out the function of holistic service providers. In their list of recommendations, they propose that the federal, provincial, and territorial governments are to support institutional and other efforts by and for the urban Aboriginal population both financially, as far as their fiscal capacities allow, and through policies and active implementation assistance. Economic development and success cannot be separated from fully functioning communities. Culturally adequate, Aboriginal-controlled services would avoid the barriers many Aboriginal people experience when facing bureaucracy, government formalities, and the conflicts between their cultural upbringing and government practices.

Governance

Finally, the chapter on “Governance” deals in part with jurisdictional issues the urban Aboriginal community is facing. As established earlier, Aboriginal peoples need their own solutions based on control over their own affairs and holistic self-governance approaches that include economic development based on Aboriginal principles and values. Even though urban Aboriginals have many different cultural backgrounds, they have a common spiritual bond that unites them and makes them a community of interest. With this insight in mind, the Royal Commission identifies three possible self-governance structures, which affect urban Aboriginal populations in different ways. The three suggestions are (1) the *nation government* model, (2) the *public government* model, and (3) the *community of interest government* model. The three models are meant to be generalized suggestions for guidance. They point out that Aboriginal self-government is possible and can take on many different forms. All three models have to consider territory, citizenship, jurisdiction, government structure, urban extensions of jurisdiction, and inter-Aboriginal structures as factors in their organization.

A *nation government* would be based on territory, and citizenship would be determined by the individual nations’ definitions of membership. Such a government would be in charge of its members living on and off the national land base. In this case, urban members of the nation would be under the jurisdiction and service delivery of their nation’s government, which would potentially be located at a far distance from an urban individual’s location of choice.

The *public government* could be a multi-level government with communal and territorial aspects of jurisdiction over all Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal residents of its defined land base. This model is most likely to be viable in northern Inuit communities and would affect urban Aboriginals in northern towns. All residents would be served by the same institutions. Therefore, this model has potential to reduce racism and institutional disadvantages for Aboriginal sub-groups of the population.

The *community of interest governance structure* has the ability and responsibility to form and oversee urban or rural communities of interest. Membership of a community of interest would be based on individual choice. There might be access to a land base for a variety of uses, but it would not be the focus of this form of government nor would the majority of the members necessarily live on that land. The government purposes could be limited to certain services and organizational structures. The government might evolve from existing institutions and service providers, such as Friendship Centres, with the difference and advantage that funding would be more secure, long-term, and consistent. This model has the strongest urban focus, but *The Report* points out some potential constraints. These constraints include the need for such a government to be empowered by another level of Aboriginal or

Canadian government, controversial population definitions and limits, the viability and cost efficiency of program and service delivery on such a scale, and overlapping with other forms of Aboriginal governments and jurisdictions.

Position of 'The Report' in the UAED Discussion

In the "Economic Development" chapter, *The Report* elaborates on Canadian Aboriginal economic realities as opposed to narrow stereotypes. They inform about the diversity of Aboriginal economies ranging from comprehensive land claim regions with upcoming resource business ventures to reserves with an active small business sector. However, they also confirm that there are many communities suffering from underdeveloped economies and lacking self-reliance, among them many urban communities. The Royal Commission sets out to educate about those kinds of communities and their issues and to make recommendations that will eventually lead to improvements. Urban Aboriginal economic development calls for holistic, community-oriented, culturally adequate approaches that allow and support the maintenance of cultural identity, traditions, values and practices, and self-governance. While recognizing the difficulties and possible obstacles on the way to healthy, self-determined, and stable Aboriginal communities, *The Report* points out the potential, especially of urban populations, to build bridges and establish a new, positive relationship between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal neighbours.

SOURCES

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Volume II, Part One, Chapter 3 'Governance'

---Part Two, Chapter 5 'Economic Development'

---Part Two, Chapter 6 'Conclusion'

Volume IV, Chapter 7 'Urban Perspectives'

---Appendix A 'Summary of Recommendations, Volume 4'

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