

Urban Aboriginal Economic Development National Network



Are there lessons from the “Harvard Project on American Indian Economic Development” that could be applied to urban Aboriginal economic development in Canadian centres?

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Author Information: John McBride is an experienced community organizer and social enterprise business person. He has been studying, consulting, writing and teaching in the areas of Aboriginal community and organizational development for over 17 years. His major research has centered on how to create a climate of support for Aboriginal entrepreneurs. He has published his findings under the title, “Minding Our Own Businesses: how to create support in First Nations communities for Aboriginal business.”

His other recent publications are, “Our Own Vision: Our Own Plan”, 6 case studies of Aboriginal economic development in B.C., and “Rebuilding First Nations: the tools, traditions and relationships,” a record of a conference on First Nations governance and accountability. More recently John has researched and written about regional service delivery, housing governance, child and family services, and Aboriginal educational strategies and tools. He recently designed and tested an Aboriginal organizational assessment tool, and conducted a series of Learning Circles for Aboriginal non-profit organizations.

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About the Urban Aboriginal Economic Development Network: The Urban Aboriginal Economic Development 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 NGO’s. 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>

The Harvard Project research has illuminated surprising results

Since 1987, the Harvard Project on American Indian Economic Development has focused on the conditions under which self-determined social and economic development is achieved among American Indian nations. The research has been conducted both in the United States and Canada, through partnerships with many tribes and bands, responding to the needs they identified. Over 100 papers have been written, and as many seminars and workshops held.¹

The Harvard Project has pointed out some major differences between the conventional thinking on economic development, and economic development on tribal lands. Conventional thinking attributes economic development success to access to capital, presence of natural resources, an educated labour force, and access to markets. Although these are still factors impacting development, they are not the most important factors.

The Harvard Project has identified five important factors in successful tribal economic development. They determined that successful tribes were sovereign, had effective institutions, utilized cultural traditions, and had effective leadership. The fifth factor is strategy. Following is the description of each of these factors as provided by the Harvard Project on their website.²

▶ **Sovereignty Matters.** When Native nations make their own decisions about what development approaches to take, they consistently out-perform external decision makers—on matters as diverse as governmental form, natural resource management, economic development, health care, and social service provision.

▶ **Institutions Matter.** For development to take hold, assertions of sovereignty must be backed by capable institutions of governance. Nations do this as they adopt stable rules for making decisions, establish fair and independent mechanisms for dispute resolution, and separate politics from day-to-day business and program management.

▶ **Culture Matters.** Successful economies stand on the shoulders of legitimate, culturally grounded institutions of self-government. Indigenous societies are diverse; each nation must equip itself with a governing structure, economic system, policies, and procedures that fit its own contemporary culture.

▶ **Leadership Matters.** Nation building requires leaders who introduce new knowledge and experiences, challenge assumptions, and propose change. Such leaders, whether elected, community, or spiritual, convince people that things can be different and inspire them to take action.

¹ The Harvard Project's core activities include research, advisory services, executive education and the administration of a tribal governance awards program. In all of its activities, the Harvard Project collaborates with the Native Nations Institute for Leadership, Management and Policy at the University of Arizona. The Harvard Project is also formally affiliated with the Harvard University Native American Program, an interfaculty initiative at Harvard University.

² www.hks.harvard.edu

► **Be Strategic.** This fifth factor is not profiled in the same way on the Harvard Project website but is often cited in their research as an important success factor. In practice, it indicates the importance of having a development plan that is appropriate to the particular nation's circumstances.

Although the Harvard Project has researched successful models of tribal-owned operations, their greater emphasis is on the important role to be played by entrepreneurial initiative and private enterprise in “thickening” the tribal economy. They make the case that large, capital intense enterprises can be appropriate for tribal ownership, but the real economic growth comes from private initiative. The Harvard Project documents the role of business centres, business education, business incubators, sheltered workshops, and financing alternatives in supporting a stronger community economy. There are successful examples of many of these in the urban context.

As a companion, McBride and Gerow (2001)³ outlined the task of creating a successful climate for Aboriginal entrepreneurs in reserve communities in British Columbia. Their findings identify four key supports:

- the provision of business support services,
- a community that has a strategic business direction on which entrepreneurs can ‘piggyback,’
- access to funding, and
- a community population willing to support individual business initiatives.

³ McBride and Gerow. *Minding Our Own Businesses: how to create support in First Nations communities for Aboriginal Business*, 2002

To what extent do the Harvard Project findings speak to Canadian circumstances?

There are some differences between American and Canadian circumstances, but as Satsan⁴ points out, the similarities are much greater than the differences:⁵

“...the government came in to establish reserves and take the people off their land. We all went through it. We were pushed off our lands, put on reserves, subjected to someone else’s legislation, someone else’s policies, made to speak their language. We were made dependent in so many aspects of our lives. .. And one of the most important things in our nations – our spirituality – has been damaged as well, swept away by the churches and the government. In some of our communities now there’s a spiritual wasteland. Since that time our agenda has been to regain our place on our lands, to take back our laws, to take back our government, to take back responsibility of ourselves, and most of all, to reclaim the spirituality that is so important for us, and to fulfill our obligations to the land.”

Most of the Harvard Project work has been conducted with U.S. tribes with large populations and extensive reserve lands. A larger population commonly means more native speakers, greater frequency of cultural practice - a more intact culture. Most Canadian bands are smaller, their cultures less intact, and therefore less able to draw on cultural capital to support community development.

The extensive work that Harvard Project investigators⁶ have been invited to conduct for Canadian Aboriginal groups is an indication that what they have found about development in the American context, especially the identified 5 important factors, is applicable to Canadian circumstances.

Differences between on and off-reserve?

In using the Harvard findings as a lens for looking at urban Aboriginal economic development, it is important first to note some differences from the tribal or on-reserve circumstances and the context of Canadian urban settings. Evelyn Peters (2009)⁷ points out the following urban Aboriginal challenges: overcoming urban Aboriginal fragmentation, including the lack of cultural cohesion, and the implications for urban governance, no tax advantages, and the lack of a land and natural resource base. The advantages she cites are the better access to markets, a more highly educated community to draw upon with higher levels of employment that may provide increased capacity for creating a capable governance structure.

⁴ Herb George, Wet’suet’en Chief, British Columbia, and founder and president of the National Centre for First Nations Governance

⁵ Jorgensen, Miriam. 2007 Rebuilding Native Nations. University of Arizona Press. Page 321

⁶ Harvard Project personnel that have worked extensively in Canada are: Steven Cornell, Manley Begay, and Miriam Jorgensen.

⁷ Urban Aboriginal Economic Development Network web site <abdc.bc.ca/uaed/> 2009.

Can Harvard Findings be Applied to the Urban Aboriginal Community?

There are a number of current examples useful in examining emerging institutions in the urban Aboriginal economic development context.

Urban Aboriginal councils ('metro councils') have been established in cities such as Vancouver and Edmonton in attempts to achieve a degree of sovereignty and establish institutions that will be effective and able to forge community development strategies. These councils bring together representatives of mostly urban Aboriginal service agencies. They typically deal with a wide variety of issues including spirituality, education, training, community healing, housing, and economic development.

Although this governance structure lacks a formal mandate, the Harvard findings also tell us that the assumption of sovereignty is almost as empowering as sovereignty itself. Without some form of governance, urban Aboriginal communities are left without collective and strategic decision making.

Evelyn Peters, in "Opportunities and Challenges ..." ⁸ comments on the potential for Aboriginal sovereignty in urban centres with larger Aboriginal populations:

"...it may be important to view the idea of political sovereignty from another perspective. If the main kernel of this ingredient is control over a variety of interlocking initiatives ... that have to do with creating healthy communities, it may be that some urban areas offer an advantage because of their larger population size. In other words, there may be more opportunities for "institutional completeness" in some urban areas because the large numbers of Aboriginal people can support a variety of initiatives."

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?

⁸ Ibid.