

Urban Aboriginal Economic Development National Network



Background Brief:
Community University
Institute for Social Research

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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>

CUISR facilitates partnerships between the university and the larger community in order to engage in relevant social research that supports a deeper understanding of our communities and that reveals opportunities for improving our quality of life. (CUISR website)

CUISR was established at the University of Saskatchewan over seven years ago with the objective of forming true partnerships based on trust and respect between communities and the university. Research conducted by CUISR teams is to be beneficial to both partners. Partnerships that include the Urban Aboriginal Strategy (UAS) and Prince Albert Grand Council (PAGC) allow for good working relationships with Aboriginal communities. As a forum for academics with interests in social subjects and for community agencies with interests in research projects, CUISR brings together many disciplines and community entities.

CUISR is committed to collaborative research and to accurate, objective reporting of research results in the public domain, taking into account the needs for confidentiality in gathering, disseminating, and storing information. (CUISR website)

The organization identifies ways to spread knowledge and research outcomes, such as “newsletters, brown bag luncheons, reports, monographs, listserv, website, and the CUISR Resource Room” (CUISR Background). CUISR also provides training and experience to students as well as community members to familiarize both sides with research practices and risks, especially with respect to vulnerable communities. In their research, CUISR members follow five guiding principles to ensure commitment to CUISR’s “vision, mandate, goals, and holistic approaches”:

- Ensuring open communication; sharing knowledge, rationales, and decisions; recognizing and resolving conflicts
- Learning and building knowledge together through multiple methods and approaches
- Responding to community and university needs, concerns, and priorities
- Working cooperatively to achieve mutually beneficial decisions through consensus
- Value diverse contributions and actively listening to multiple points of view (CUISR. Concept)

The CUISR Board consists of equal community and university representation. The Community Co-Director position and Research Co-Director for the Quality of Life Research Module is held by Bill Holden, a Senior Planner with the City of Saskatoon Community Services Department. The University Co-Director and Research Co-Director of the Community Economic Development Module is Louise Clarke, Associate Professor at the Department of Industrial Relations and Organizational Behavior. Further Board members are Research Co-Directors as well as Affiliates for Health, Community Economic Development, and Quality of Life research

modules representing the community and the university; Community Board members at large represent organizations and programs such as the Urban Aboriginal Strategy, Communities for Children, and KidsFirst.

Research Modules and Strategic Directions

Originally, CUISR established three Research Modules, the Health Module, the Economic Module, and the Quality of Life Module (QoL). The modules were closely related and many projects and participants were part of more than one of them. The main focus of all research projects was community health and sustainability.

The Health Module was concerned with research that aimed at preparing communities to improve their health based on a number of socioeconomic, health service, and cultural factors.

The Economic Module focused on Community Economic Development (CED) and was based on the insight that low-income communities tend to be unable to hold and accumulate capital, which instead is drained because land, housing, industries, and financial institutions are owned and controlled by entities outside the communities. Moreover, CUISR recognized that Saskatoon's Aboriginal population did not benefit from existing economic development models and was in need of culturally adequate CED programs. Aspects such as increasing urban migration and urban concentration of economic activities had to be taken into account. CUISR's goal was to combine two separate views of CED, the supply-oriented approach which promotes reduction of barriers and increase of mobility to attract business, and the demand-oriented approach which is in favour of support for skills and education, and assistance for businesses and entrepreneurs.

CUISR research was directed towards identifying long-term success determinants, considering interrelations between economy, society, and environment, ultimately developing and providing tools to measure success of community organizations and their CED programs. In addition, the Economic Module examined the link between local CED and socio-economic, political, and demographic situations and global structures and mechanisms. The roles of external organizations and government programs in CED were analyzed, keeping in mind that outside influence should always regard community goals and aim at vesting control in the community. Of three factors identified to contribute to CED, physical infrastructure, personal infrastructure, and social capital, the third one is thought to have been neglected in research. Therefore, CUISR aimed its CED research at identifying social capital components to allow communities to build on their social capital and fully benefit from their infrastructural advantages.

The QoL research module was mainly concerned with identifying indicators that enable communities to measure and ultimately improve their QoL. Since QoL issues were increasingly met with policy-making strategies, CUISR saw the need to provide indicators and identify ways to use them for policy development.

More recently, CUISR has categorized its work into five strategic directions to allow adaptation and evolution of research areas in response to community realities. The first strategic direction is *Saskatoon Community Sustainability*. This element has been developed out of the QoL Research

Module. Partnerships have been strengthened and the UAS has become an integral part of the collaborative work.

The *Social Economy* strategic direction has evolved out of CUISR cooperation with the Province on a regional level. The partnership with *Linking, Learning, Leveraging: Social Enterprises, Knowledgeable Economies, and Sustainable Communities* is a central element of this work.

Rural-Urban Community Links is a project with focus on opportunities for rural and urban areas to remain sustainable so that citizens can choose where to live or move repeatedly between the two, as opposed to being forced by socio-economic decline of an area. CUISR points out that this is especially interesting for Aboriginal people who tend to move between their communities of origin and urban centres.

Another community development focus is on *Building Alliances for Indigenous Women's Community Development*. Work in this area includes the national level as well as Central and South America and aims at understanding what fosters and what hinders community development on a local and on a global level and how it affects subordinated populations.

Finally, CUISR has dedicated a strategic direction to the *Analysis of Community-University Partnerships*. CUISR sees itself as a pioneer in this field and wants to investigate development and opportunities of such partnerships so that other organizations can learn from CUISR as a role model and a source of information and experience.

Linking, Learning, Leveraging: Social Enterprises, Knowledgeable Economies, and Sustainable Communities

This initiative is involved in CUISR's Social Economy research. Academic researchers, students, and community partner organizations work together in this project funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC). Twenty-four academic partners representing ten disciplines and twelve Canadian and American universities working in collaboration with over forty community partners from across Canada, the USA, and beyond are working together on this project. Apart from CUISR, the **Winnipeg Inner-City Research Alliance**, the Community Economic and Social Development Unit, and the **Centre for the Study of Co-operatives form the foundation of the research.**

The term *Social Economy* refers to “community-based organizations, co-operatives, community economic development organizations, not-for-profits, and other voluntary-sector initiatives”, which pursue both social and economic goals. As such, social economic enterprises enable communities to address multiple issues at the same time, e.g.” sustainable livelihoods, place-based redevelopment, capacities, and social supports” (LLL website). Individuals and communities benefit and profit, while capital stays in the community and contributes to sustainable CED. The initiative intends to examine challenges, success factors, and crucial links and partnerships in order to learn from existing social economic enterprises and establish a pool of best practices, knowledge, and experience to allow new social enterprises to build on others' experiences and expertise.

Bridges and Foundations Project on Urban Aboriginal Housing

The *Bridges and Foundations Project on Urban Aboriginal Housing* (Bridges and Foundations) is one of CUISR's publications. The project goal was to build “*functional sustainable relationships between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal organizations to design and develop culturally supportive communities and quality affordable housing options*” (CUISR Publications). This three-year project, funded by SSHRC and the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation, was initiated in 2001 as part of the Community-University Research Alliance (CURA). CURA supports and funds innovative community-university collaborative initiatives that focus on cultural and socio-economic community development.

Bridges and Foundations is headed by three Co-Directors:

- Dr. Alan Anderson; professor at the University of Saskatchewan
- Priscilla Settee; director of the Extension's Indigenous People's Program at the University of Saskatchewan
- Keith Hanson; president of the Sun Ridge Group

Their work addresses and facilitates relationships and cooperation of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal organizations with the intent to contribute to culturally supportive communities and, at the same time, respond to housing issues, which are closely linked to QoL matters. Areas of research are urban Aboriginal housing, urban Aboriginal socio-demographics, urban Aboriginal involvement in the construction sector, and urban Aboriginal home ownership.

In form of Sharing Circles, the Co-Directors share concepts and ideas with university and community stakeholders. In their Final Report, they state that one of their main areas of success was the creation of trustful relationships between the Aboriginal community, the university, and other local stakeholders and the recognition on all parts that this form of collaboration is generally beneficial to all parties involved. Moreover, the authors of the Report emphasize that the project has enabled the Aboriginal community to take control and actively participate in decision-making processes. The Aboriginal community is not to be seen as the subject of the study but as an equal partner in the project.

The Value of CUISR to Urban Aboriginal Economic Development (UAED)

One of the most valuable lessons to be learned from CUISR in a UAED context is the establishment and appreciation of partnerships. CUISR shows mainly university-community relations but also includes businesses and industries. The examples demonstrate how partnerships can and should be beneficial to all parties. From a UAED perspective, inclusion in academic studies brings useful material and statistics, which can be used to leverage funding, identify areas in need of attention, and initiate programs.

Academic partners can provide a communication platform and help with the identification of areas of study conducive to UAED. CUISR's development from the initial research modules to

more defined strategic directions shows that partnerships and their work can evolve with changing realities, needs, and insights.

Especially the Bridges and Foundations project is relevant to UAED as it addresses crucial issues such as housing, sustainable relationships within the community, cultural support, and employment. The idea of facilitating relationships between communities, academics, and businesses is of importance in UAED, and the findings of CUISR's study point at success in the area of relationships and cooperation, as all parties agreed that their collaboration had been beneficial to all of them.

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