

# Urban Aboriginal Economic Development National Network

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Background Brief:  
The Urban Aboriginal Strategy –  
A Review from an Urban  
Aboriginal Economic  
Development (UAED)  
Perspective

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**Title:** The Urban Aboriginal Strategy – A Review from an Urban Aboriginal Economic Development (UAED) Perspective

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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>

## *Facts and Figures*

In response to the publication of the *Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples* in 1996, the Government of Canada initiated *Gathering Strength: Canada's Aboriginal Action Plan*. One aspect of this action plan is the Urban Aboriginal Strategy (UAS), a federal strategy developed in 1997/1998. The UAS addresses urban Aboriginal socio-economic issues and needs and is meant to be a framework for pilot projects in a number of cities across Canada. As listed in the *Final Report* by Anderson-Gill, the overall goals of the UAS are to enhance the coordination of government actions, build and strengthen horizontal linkages between government departments, improve policy integration within the Federal Government, and facilitate partnerships with other stakeholders to respond to urban Aboriginal needs. This strategy is not meant to be a program with a defined focus, but leaves the areas of interest open in order to provide flexibility and respond to individual community needs. Furthermore, the UAS was created to provide a focal point for cooperation among stakeholders and governments, and a platform for urban planning. The strategic vision behind the UAS was to find new ways of addressing urban Aboriginal issues, to rethink government service delivery, and to leverage resources in order to move beyond budget pressures and dependency on committed funds.

In 2003, the Government announced a budget of \$25 million allocated to the UAS for a three year period. This budget was increased to \$50 million in 2004. This increase in funding was accompanied by an expansion of UAS projects and an extension of the project phase to four years. It also allowed additional government departments to be involved to increase coordination and collaboration efforts as noted by Anderson-Gill in section 2.6. Priorities were reviewed in 2007 as Canada's New Government decided to commit to a budget of \$68.5 million to the UAS over the following five years.

The majority of the funds, as allocated in 2003, went towards pilot projects in eight major urban centres with significant Aboriginal populations: Vancouver, Calgary, Edmonton, Saskatoon, Regina, Winnipeg, Toronto, and Thunder Bay. The pilot projects were meant to provide insight into what types of projects are successful and useful in an urban Aboriginal context. The 2004 budget increase allowed the inclusion of four additional cities in the pilot project phase: Prince George, Lethbridge, Prince Albert, and Thompson.

As the AINC-INAC *UAS- Backgrounder* reports, the funding for the 2003-2006 period of the UAS consisted of \$28.7 million in Federal Government resources allocated specifically to the UAS, \$9.6 million from other federal departments, and \$21.8 million from other partners, including provincial governments, municipalities, Aboriginal groups, and the private sector.

## *Pilot Projects*

The 2005 formative evaluation outlines the main objectives of the UAS pilot projects. They are supposed to be open in their project definitions to allow region-specific priorities, which can be *inter alia* education, crime prevention, housing, business, social service delivery, or transition services for urban migrants. The three broad, declared goals for the pilot projects are organizational capacity, partnerships, and the coordination of federal resources. A more detailed

look reveals four main activities, for which funding is allocated: *capacity building*, *horizontal coordination*, *research*, and *advocacy* (Anderson-Gill 5f).

*Capacity building* refers to the enhancement of existing organizations and the formation of specific UAS committees. These groups are expected to build and improve their abilities to outline their goals, execute their plans and deliver services, learn solution-oriented problem solving, and understand urban Aboriginal matters in order to contribute to sustainable long-term strategies. In a national context, this means building community capacity, promoting awareness of urban Aboriginal challenges, and supporting partnerships on all levels.

*Horizontal coordination* refers to the organization and structure of federal initiatives, resources, and departments. All aspects of federal efforts in urban areas related to urban Aboriginal matters should be linked more flexibly so as to combine their efforts where appropriate and improve their services and results through clearer focus and better responsiveness.

*Research* and *advocacy* are areas used to increase awareness of urban Aboriginal problems and needs, advance understanding among the general public as well as practitioners and scholars, and create tools and information for policy makers and practitioners to help optimize their efforts. The expected outcomes for the initial three-year period of the pilot projects include: region-wide strategic management of urban Aboriginal issues, enhanced federal responsiveness, strong reflection of urban Aboriginal issues in policies, an increase in academic interest and research results, more stakeholders and resources in the urban Aboriginal arena, identification of best practices, improved employability of the urban Aboriginal population, and general increase in skills and abilities of urban Aboriginal people (Anderson-Gill 4).

The *Final Report* of the formative evaluation of the initial pilot projects mentions that the 2005 evaluation is taking place at a time when no real results are to be expected, yet, and the results confirm this. The authors recommend further interim evaluations at later dates, but none are published as of April 2010.

### *Urban Aboriginal Economic Development (UAED) and Governance*

From a specifically *economic* point of view, the UAS has some relevant elements. Anderson-Gill explicitly include “economic development” in their list of urban Aboriginal issues that are in need of attention within the UAS (8). However, the meaning of the UAS for UAED potentially goes beyond a focus on economic development. As repeatedly stated in the *Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples*, holistic approaches are essential to Aboriginal service delivery. That means, in order to achieve successful urban Aboriginal economic development, all aspects of urban Aboriginal life have to be addressed and included in remedy and improvement attempts. The thematically open nature of the UAS allows for such holistic approaches and leaves room to address a variety of socio-economic challenges in the urban Aboriginal context.

One important aspect of positive urban Aboriginal economic development is ‘governance’. Jurisdiction, responsibility, and organization of service delivery, and each Aboriginal community’s way towards self-determination are important features of urban Aboriginal

economic development. The organizational structures developed as part of the UAS, and the position of the UAS in light of the Aboriginal self-government debate, can provide valuable insight into how specific Aboriginal service delivery can or should be structured in urban areas.

The Office of the Federal Interlocutor for Métis and Non-Status Indians (OFI) oversees the coordination and management of the UAS' inter-departmental committee structure on a national level. The committee structure is responsible for the implementation of the UAS and consists of three groups: a National Committee of Federal Officials for strategic support and advice, an inter-departmental working group in charge of policy and program coordination, and regional committees acting as federal representatives in the on-the-ground implementation processes. The regional committees are intended to serve as single window agencies in dealing with urban Aboriginal issues. They are also expected to perform capacity building activities and take on mentoring roles in the communities to increase the urban Aboriginal communities' functionality and quality of life, and improve the efficiency of service delivery institutions. The Logic Model in Appendix A of the Final Report of the Formative Evaluation provides detailed information on the organizational structure of the pilot projects.

In addition, each city has developed its own UAS committee consisting of representatives from the Aboriginal communities and from all levels of government. These committees make recommendations concerning projects and funding allocation and oversee the implementation. Question remains whether this model supports Aboriginal self-determination and is able to respond to Aboriginal needs in a culturally adequate manner.

In their data collection for a formative evaluation, Anderson-Gill have encountered criticism of this organizational structure, especially from the Aboriginal communities. One concern revolves around the fact that the Federal Government is in control of funding and decision-making while the committees consisting of community representatives have mere advisory functions and are left with the implementation of government projects. Representation concerns go further as some Aboriginal communities and individuals argue that Aboriginal representatives in the local committees are not actually representing the people but are instead part of a political elite among the Aboriginal communities.

Meanwhile, one of the expressed goals of the projects is local leadership capacity building. It could be argued that a temporary federal organizational model has the potential to train local leaders and representatives in order to hand over control and decision-making within a defined period of time.

In 2005, the formative evaluation report shows that support for community development was considered insufficient. Communication and consultation with the Aboriginal communities was lacking, and there was no funding set aside to improve the model in that area even though it was recognized that communities were under-equipped in leadership capacities, and that capacity building was integral to effective long-term strategies (25, 33ff).

## *Lessons for scholars and practitioners of UAED*

The UAS is valuable for scholars and practitioners in the field of urban Aboriginal economic development thanks to lessons learned in the implementation process as well as definitions, evaluation methods, and strategic directions.

*Capacity building* is one area that provides insights. The UAS purpose, “to help provide Aboriginal communities with the tools they need to flourish and ultimately to close the gap between themselves and the non-Aboriginal population” (35), gives general direction to those who work towards urban Aboriginal development. The UAS further defines some capacity building features: organizational structures and procedures, increased planning expertise among Aboriginal leadership, project development skills, service delivery, research and analysis expertise, and community asset building (36). These capacities aim at long-term planning. At the time of the 2005 formative evaluation, the UAS was not successful in all of these areas, but the definitions can be useful none the less.

Any program, strategy, or action plan supporting urban Aboriginal economic development needs to be evaluated as to its effectiveness and practicability in order to avoid wasting resources and to optimize actions. The evaluation methods and parameters employed in Anderson-Gill’s formative evaluation can be used as tools in other projects as well. Document reviews, performance indicators, interviews, community case studies, and surveys of organizations and stakeholders are procedures that could be applicable to other projects related to urban Aboriginal issues (10ff).

Beyond the methods, the findings of the 2005 UAS evaluation provide insight into the success and failure of certain strategies and approaches. Therefore, they are relevant for planning, targeting, and implementation of urban Aboriginal economic development initiatives. The question of Aboriginal inclusiveness in the formative evaluation of the UAS seems to have brought up a wide range of strong responses. Representation issues, lack of communication, and the perception that the Government is making the decisions for the communities are widespread concerns. The authors of the evaluation point out the lack of clarity pertaining to committee selection processes and representation, and the lack of presence and awareness in some communities (19ff). It is suggested that this is where some difficulties in cooperation with existing Aboriginal organizations and interest groups originated. Anderson-Gill’s report points out problems with contacting local groups, even obtaining basic contact information, as well as the inability of the authors of the formative evaluation to motivate some communities and groups to participate and contribute to the Strategy and the evaluation (14).

Communication is a key to successful cooperation between stakeholders and governments. The UAS evaluation shows several instances of how poor communication can lead to problems. It reports not only the above mentioned lack of clarity and interaction between UAS committees and communities, but also on limited coordination efforts between government departments and uncoordinated funding efforts also originating in insufficient communication (26ff).

The outcome of evaluation interviews show how fragile the relationship between the Federal Government and Aboriginal communities still is due to negative experiences in the past and

today. Committees reported progress and trust building, but this progress had, at the time, not reached most communities.

In urban Aboriginal economic development, long-term strategic planning is essential to achieving real change and improvements. Anderson-Gill repeatedly report on a lack of long-term focus in the UAS (23f, 27, and 32). In 2005, the Strategy is set up, equipped, and resourced for the execution of the temporary pilot projects (34). However, Anderson-Gill emphasize that short-term funding and planning are to be avoided. Other obstacles and impediments are misalignment of strategic focus and financial reality, unclear terms of reference, lack of continued strategic direction, and inflexible government departments (41). Further challenges are complexity, difficulties in building new relationships, and systemic and bureaucratic barriers (43). Palpable results in form of enhanced quality of life for urban Aboriginal people are only possible in a long-term time frame.

Anderson-Gill also name positive elements of the UAS. Some expressed objectives, when successfully implemented, could be helpful advice for urban Aboriginal economic development scholars and practitioners. These include flexibility and community-based decision making and planning are important; the allocation of smaller budgets gets more provincial support as provinces see fewer long-term risks and are more willing to support the projects; information sharing between all government levels and departments, and involved stakeholders, facilitates service delivery and appropriate response to community needs; “The idea of the UAS as a focal point for long-term planning” shows innovation and is promising (41).

### *Recent Projects*

Anderson-Gill recommend that the UAS go beyond short-term funding for small projects within limited time frames, and instead aim at creating strategic, collaborative capacities to address urban Aboriginal issues (51). In 2005, they mention that some communities chose to leave funds unspent if they were not allocated to effective long-term projects (40). A look at recent projects undertaken within the UAS shows a wide range of projects. Looking at Prince George, BC projects for the fiscal year 2007- 2008, there are some promising projects in support of urban Aboriginal people’s advancement and urban Aboriginal economic development. Computer and life skill training as well as an Aboriginal Construction Program contribute to education and employability; a Community Linkages Soup Bus acts as single window service delivery including not only food, but also educational aspects and referrals to other services; the Asset Building and Rent Bank Initiative addresses the urban Aboriginal housing situation and fights homelessness. These projects range from \$18,000 to over \$70,000.

An example for much needed cultural support for youth in urban areas is the Walk Tall Youth Conference. However, this example also highlights the challenges that arise from a lack of continuity. In the previous year, there had been another youth conference hosted by a local Aboriginal service delivery facility and in combination with a soup bus initiative. While a youth conference, as well as a soup bus, are important initiatives for the urban Aboriginal population, the changing organization and funding show that the focus on resource allocation and planning is still short-term and limited.

Other projects, such as a residential school survivor initiative, are also important for urban Aboriginal development. The UAS Capacity Funding is financially the biggest item on the list of projects. This shows that capacity and structure building processes are far from completed.

Calgary, AB, which has been part of the UAS pilot projects from the beginning, shows more continuity in some of its projects. They have established a Youth Employment and Skills Training program, which responds to urban Aboriginal economic development needs of education, training, and employability and has been running for several consecutive years. Another example from Calgary shows how the UAS can be tied into other initiatives to channel funds for urban Aboriginal issues and achieve long-term benefits. The Calgary Urban Aboriginal Initiative (CUAI) already existed when the UAS was established. They use UAS funds of \$925,000 in 2007-2008 for their own objectives, which mostly coincide with UAS goals, and focus on strategic issues such as capacity building, partnerships, sustainability, organizational structures, communication, Aboriginal inclusiveness, and transparency. These objectives go beyond UAS outcomes as outlined in the 2005 formative evaluation and address a lot of the problems that were identified with UAS implementation. In a 'governance' and 'self-determination' context, the CUAI also has the advantage that it directly vests decision-making and implementation powers in community representatives (Anderson-Gill 36f).

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