

SHARING CANADA'S PROSPERITY A HAND UP, NOT A HANDOUT

Final Report Special Study on the involvement of Aboriginal communities and businesses in economic development activities in Canada

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Standing Senate Committee on Aboriginal Peoples

March 2007

PART IX: ECONOMIC VALUE OF TRADITIONAL ECONOMIES

Large scale resource development projects have, at times, both transformed the traditional territories of Aboriginal people and restricted their customary livelihood. Deputy Grand Chief Terry Waboose, Nishnawbe Aski Nation, talked of how his people experienced the settlement and development of northern Ontario:

As great as the changes have been in the Nishnawbe Aski communities over the last 30 years, the challenges of the next three decades far exceed those of the past. Industry and resource development are quickly encroaching on our traditional lands north of the 50th parallel.

The economic contribution of traditional harvesting activities (i.e., hunting, fishing and trapping) is often poorly captured in official statistics. The emphasis is often on the market or public sector economies with the "customary sector" - as it was referred to by Professor Jon Altman - overlooked even though it is very important to Aboriginal communities, especially those in isolated areas.¹⁹² Statistics Canada, for example, estimates that roughly \$40 million dollars of country food is produced annually by Inuit.¹⁹³ Similarly, in testimony to the Committee, Michael Anderson of the Manitoba Keewatinook Ininew Okimowin (MKO) told us that:

[T]he in-kind replacement value of the game and fish harvested domestically, if it were to be purchased with cash at a store, is valued at between \$35 million and \$50 million per year within the MKO region. *Those are tremendous values that form, by any measurement, a foundation of the basis of the economies of our Nations, often ignored and not protected officially by policy.*¹⁹⁴ [Emphasis Added]

Witnesses told the Committee that many Aboriginal communities, most especially those in northern and rural areas, depend upon, and work with, the daily resource base surrounding them, in a variety of traditional, commercial, and in-kind harvesting activities. The importance of traditional activities to the identity and culture of Aboriginal people was also underlined by Jack Park, Chair of Economic Development, Manitoba Métis Federation:

Many Metis choose to remain in their traditional communities and spend a lifetime acquiring the skills necessary for participation in a traditional economy.

Such individuals are very proficient at what they do and possess a number of highly specialized skills. These community members leave a legacy of traditional knowledge and a greater understanding of Metis customs which fosters Metis identity and a closer connection to the land.

In addition to preserving the cultural connection and spiritual ties to the land, witnesses spoke of the health benefits of country food, cautioning against conceptualizing the traditional economy in purely monetary terms:

We all know that we have enormously high rates of diabetes in the MKO region. The elders and traditional healers all say, “eat country food and stay active.” If we were to document the direct and indirect monetary value of the traditional economy, it is certainly many-fold greater than a simple measurement of the commercial returns.

Brad Hicke, Acting Director, Economic and Business Development, Nunavut Tunngavik Inc., told the Committee that:

While it is difficult to quantify the value of the traditional economy in monetary terms, there are tangible quality of life benefits, as well as the benefits of nutritious food, cultural heritage and some economic returns.

The Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami observes that for Inuit living in the northern territories, supporting greater access to country (traditional) foods and participation in the traditional economy takes on greater significance when one considers that by far the greatest share of personal debt is linked to the purchase of food.⁽¹⁹⁸⁾ As a result, some Inuit do not receive the basic dietary requirements of life. In such cases, it is strong ties to the land and access to country food that supply families with the essential dietary staples.

The effect of large scale development on traditional economies is also an issue of some concern to witnesses. We heard that the pursuit of traditional activities is often adversely affected by large scale economic development, such as mining and hydroelectric developments. Examples of this process include the now well-known hydro-megaprojects of the 1960s and 1970s in the James Bay region of Québec, located within Cree traditional territory. The tension between large scale developments - and the resulting employment and economic benefits they can bring - and the preservation of traditional economies can be divisive and difficult to resolve.

In 2002, the Crees of northern Québec were again faced with this dilemma with the signing of the Paix des Braves or New Relationship Agreement. The Agreement is an attempt to provide the Cree nation with tools to facilitate economic and community development and the “active and ongoing participation by the Crees in economic development activities on the James Bay Territory.” In return, the Cree of northern Québec agree to the diversion of the Rupert River,

making way for hydro-electric development and the subsequent flooding of lands. Many Cree, particularly hunters and trappers, have been reluctant to accept the New Relationship Agreement and continue to actively protest hydro development. Still, others have suggested that hunting and fishing can no longer support a rapidly growing population and that development is necessary, especially for the younger generations.

Balancing these competing interests between the market and traditional economy will not be simple. While many agree – if only fatalistically – with the words of Bill Namagoose, editor of the *Eenou Eeyou Nation*, that the Cree will follow a well-worn path to exclusion from economic and social opportunity if they don't take advantage of large scale development opportunities, there is, to be certain, a sense that something of greater value will have been lost. Compensation may be, as Michael Anderson states, inadequate “to set aside these adverse effects on the traditional and income economies.”

The reality, however, is that most Aboriginal communities cannot rely solely on the traditional economy to sustain their populations. Yet, it is too simplistic to frame the issue simply as a choice between the modern or customary economy. Based on what we heard, the fundamental issue to Aboriginal leaders, communities and individuals, rather, is being able to have a say on how development takes place on their land, to meaningfully participate in the benefits of that development and to manage development in such a way as to mitigate the impact on traditional activities. According to Matthew Coon-Come the real challenge is to be able to work with industry to ensure that development is sustainable:

The difficulty we face occurs when there are clear-cutting operations with the trees being cut under a heavily mechanized system. Mining activities are starting to spring up and lands are being flooded. The small and big game are being driven away from the land. When you have no small and big game, you drive people off the land. The challenge is to be able to work with the industry... It is a matter of working together with the industry to be able to ensure that that way of life continues. The problem has always been enforcing those regulations to the industry. The intent was to have a relationship with industry that would ensure compatibility with that way of life. Our challenge now is that development is encroaching on that way of life.

However communities choose to balance these competing interests will ultimately be up to them. Governments, nevertheless, have an important role in ensuring that Aboriginal peoples are provided the institutional mechanisms necessary to gain a measure of control over the pace and scope of development within their traditional territories.