



## Making Indigenous Engagement Economically Sustainable

Fluctuating resource values and shifting regulations needn't spell the end of joint initiatives and outreach programming.

Many resource development projects across Canada – past, present, and future – come together with beautiful language about how all Indigenous and First Nations stakeholders will be involved and engaged. However, the realities on the ground are not always as rosy as the press releases would lead one to believe. One big reason why things fall to pieces or limp along has to do with the economic basis for meaningful Indigenous participation.

The end goal for any organization is equity, stability, and predictability in operations and planning. Analyzing key information and perspectives can provide insights into what can make indigenous engagement in projects an economic win and a sustainable, positive experience.

### Find Patience and Build Trust

In a review of the experiences of 25 communities across Canada with resource development projects, the Minister of Indian Affairs and Northern Development cited a need for trust-building and patience in any indigenous engagement effort. Burdened with unique regulatory requirements and a history of less-than-stellar treatment from resource groups, almost every community profiled reported that a lack of patience and a lack of trust were major issues in partnering with development firms and moving forward with them successfully.

Patience is actually needed by both sides. Communities partnering on a project have reported frustration with how long it takes promises to be fulfilled and the challenges of navigating the regulatory framework for development on reserve lands. Development groups are similarly frustrated with bureaucratic red tape, the responsiveness (or not) of community partners, and the time it can take councils to reach consensus on proposals.

Patience is also essential in building trust. Where trust is present, communities are able to sustain long-term, meaningful relationships with development partners. The most economically successful communities, according to the Ministerial report, had the healthiest relationships in ways that went far beyond revenues shared. Partnership believes each side had mutual best interests at heart, an intention to do the right thing, and capable team members on key committees.

One successful practice shown by sustainably engaged projects was spending extra time on building connections. This allows both sides time to demonstrate reliability and establish trust, so that they can work together patiently as the project overcomes challenges and matures into a mutually beneficial endeavor.



### Look Toward the Community's Infrastructure

A second key factor that separates the most successful projects from those that struggle to maintain healthy engagement, profitable returns, or both is the level of infrastructure that exists within the community.

Here, it is not simply a matter of roads and other logistical issues. Some communities lack the leadership structures, communication frameworks, and human services systems to make the most of their partnerships, a gap cited in the "2018 Voluntary Review of Canada's implementation of the United Nation's 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development."

In these communities, even the most generous revenue shares were not going to foster positive development. Further, an influx of resource development money tended to be poorly allocated or tied up in trusts, exacerbating equity issues and leading to zones where outward infrastructures like roads or school buildings were cutting-edge, but community members were unable to use or maintain them efficiently. As a result, engagement turned negative or contentious, with fragmented interests combing with bureaucracies to grind development to a halt.

To mitigate this problem and build a space where sustainable and meaningful engagement was possible, resource development groups need to make a special effort to go beyond straight revenue sharing arrangements and designated building projects. Wherever possible and appropriate, firms need to invest in the health of the community with leadership classes, staffing for services groups, and support for institutional development.

### Involve the Next Generation Now

Finally, any organization looking to bring more equity, stability and predictability to their natural resource operations needs to start involving the next generation right now. Meaningful economic engagement with indigenous groups conducted solely within a single age cohort lacks transferability and stability. Plus, many indigenous youth are eager to engage and be heard, as they feel their voices are needed to appropriately shape the future.

In 2017, the Conference Board of Canada hosted their first-ever Indigenous Youth and Natural Resource Development summit. What they found during this summit was that indigenous youth are already quite aware that they are inheriting the decisions being made today by their elders, and they are eager to have a larger voice in those decisions. In particular, youth are looking to shape engagement discussions in such a way that there is more attention paid to fundamental community issues like access to education, skills development programs, and improvement of educational outcomes for indigenous peoples.

Natural resource organizations willing to step forward and build relationships now will have an advantage in the coming years. The continuation and stability of many projects across the country depend on positive relationships, and youth who feel they have been left out of discussions or



marginalized are unlikely to renew past arrangements and may even choose to opt out of outside resource development in favour of in-community developments and non-resource income opportunities. In this way, they feel that they can reclaim autonomy and control over their futures, especially in the face of perceived disadvantages being passed down to them.

However, while today's indigenous youth may be more skeptical and questioning than ever, many do still view natural resource development as important to the future of their communities. Firms and organizations who show up and listen today will be building the trust and patience reserves needed to be long-term partners in community development.

As a result, they stand the best chance of being a part of a long-term, economically sustainable and meaningful engagement with indigenous communities throughout Canada.