

Indigenous land rights, entrepreneurship, and economic development in Canada: “Opting-in” to the global economy

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Abstract

Indigenous people are struggling to reassert their nationhood within the post-colonial states in which they find themselves. Claims to their traditional lands and the right to use the resources of these lands are central to their drive to nationhood. Traditional lands are the ‘place’ of the nation and are inseparable from the people, their culture, and their identity as a nation. Traditional lands and resources are the foundation upon which indigenous people intend to rebuild the economies of their nations and so improve the socioeconomic circumstance of their people—individuals, families, communities, and nations. This paper explores business development activities that flow from the later aspect of indigenous land rights in a Canadian context, suggesting that the process is a particular and important instance of social entrepreneurship.

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1. Introduction

There are various types of entrepreneurs identified in the literature and these are usually divided into groups that share an adjective in common; for example, nascent, novice, serial, and so on. Woo, Cooper, and Dunkelberg (1991) developed and interpreted entrepreneurship typologies. More recently, there has been discussion about social entrepreneurs. Mort, Weerawardena, and Carnegie (2003) define social entrepreneurship, as “the

entrepreneurship leading to the establishment of new social enterprises and the continued innovation in existing ones” (p. 76). These authors conceptualize social entrepreneurship as a multidimensional construct involving the expression of virtuous behavior in order to achieve a social mission, a coherent unity of purpose and action in the face of moral complexity, the ability to recognize social value-creating opportunities and decision-making characteristics of innovativeness, proactiveness, and risk-taking. Similarly, Pearce (2003) distinguishes social enterprise from other forms by emphasizing the following: social purpose is the principal driver of activity, with organizational sustainability as a core objective; social purpose is achieved primarily through entrepreneurship; there is little if any distribution of profit to individuals, as any surplus is reinvested for the long-term benefit of the community; constituents are democratically involved; and there is

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accountability. Borzaga and Defourny (2001) emphasize that social enterprise includes the creation of jobs and the strengthening of social capital by supporting the integration of marginal people into society at large. It is our contention that the development activities of indigenous people in Canada and elsewhere are entirely consistent with the definitions above and are therefore a particular and important instance of social entrepreneurship.

We begin our exploration of indigenous development as social entrepreneurship by discussing the importance and context of indigenous development globally and in Canada in particular. This is followed by a discussion of development theory and an assessment of the theoretical feasibility of the Aboriginal approach to development, which we contend is grounded on a foundation of social entrepreneurship. This is followed by three case studies, researched by our team using secondary research as well as interviews and triangulation (Patton, 1990).

These case studies provide powerful evidence of the importance of entrepreneurship—the identification of opportunities and the creation of enterprises to exploit these opportunities—in the Aboriginal economic development process. Especially evident are the prevalence of community ownership and the acknowledgment of the importance of long-term profitability and growth of businesses created, not as an end but as the means to an end. And it is these ends that make their activities social entrepreneurship. Some of these ends included the creation of employment with characteristics that ‘fit’ the interest, capabilities, and preferred lifestyles of community members; control of traditional lands and activities on these lands; and the creation of wealth to fund education, health and wellness, housing, and other social programs.

2. Context of the research

Over the years, once self-reliant and socially cohesive indigenous communities have suffered greatly as the result of colonial expansion bringing with it shifting economic forces, encroaching population centers, and acculturation. This is an often-told story. What receives less attention is the degree of community cohesion that remains and the desire among many indigenous people to rebuild their communities on a traditional and culturally grounded foundation (Anderson, 2002). As part of this process, indigenous people are struggling to have their rights to land and resources recognized. The following excerpt from 1993 Draft United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous

Peoples captures a sense of this agenda and, in particular, the relationship between land and ‘means of subsistence and development’:

Article 21

Indigenous peoples have the right to maintain and develop their political, economic and social systems, to be secure in the enjoyment of their own means of subsistence and development, and to engage freely in all their traditional and other economic activities. (ESCCCH Rights, 1993)

Land is important in two respects. First, traditional lands are the ‘place’ of the nation and are inseparable from the people, their culture, and their identity as a nation. Second, land and resources are the foundation upon which indigenous communities intend to rebuild the economies of their nations and so improve the socioeconomic circumstance of their people.

The current socioeconomic circumstances of the Aboriginal people in Canada are abysmal. According to 1991 census of Canada data, chosen because 1991 is the base year for certain projections made by the Royal Commission on Aboriginal People, unemployment among Aboriginal people stood at 24.6%, almost two and one-half times the national rate of 10.2%. As a result, 42% of Aboriginal people living on reserve received social welfare, as opposed to 8% of the Canadian population as a whole. Housing conditions tell a similar tale with 65% of on-reserve and 49% of off-reserve Aboriginal people living in substandard housing. Not surprisingly, poverty and poor living conditions have had an impact on the health of Aboriginal people. The incidence of tuberculosis is 17 times higher among Aboriginal people than non-Aboriginal people while the incidence of diabetes is three times higher and rising rapidly. The Aboriginal have a suicide rate two and one half times, a murder rate six times, and an incarceration rate five times higher than the respective rates for non-Aboriginal people.

According to the Royal Commission on Aboriginal People (RCAP, 1996), the Aboriginal population will rise by 52% (compared to 22% for non-Aboriginal Canadians) between 1991 and 2016. During the same period, the working age Aboriginal population will increase by 72%, compared to a 23% non-Aboriginal increase. The RCAP estimated that the total cost to the Canadian economy caused by the dismal socioeconomic circumstances of Aboriginal people in 1996 was \$7.5 billion, rising to \$11 billion by 2016 if the Aboriginal socioeconomic circumstances remain the same relative to the circumstances of non-Aboriginal Canadians.

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