

Editors' Introduction

When the Journal of Aboriginal Economic Development (JAED) delivered its call for papers asking for researchers to interrogate the idea of The State of the Aboriginal Economy, the guest editors were expecting a wide array of responses. Our expectations were based on a number of observations. In recent years for instance the numbers of Aboriginal entrepreneurs Canada-wide have grown. This is one aspect of economic growth within “the Aboriginal economy”. Also, several Aboriginal communities in their attempts to encourage economic development have developed “Buy Aboriginal” programs promoting local support for community-based businesses, another facet of “the Aboriginal economy”. But what is the Aboriginal economy? What components fuse and deviate within this process known as the Aboriginal economy? Does the Aboriginal economy stand peripheral to the Canadian macro-economy? Or is it hopelessly/sufficiently intertwined within that larger economy? These were but a few of the questions fuelling our desire to expand on the idea of Aboriginal economy — in sum the call for papers was admittedly as much a way for us to determine how researchers are currently engaging the concept of Aboriginal economy and its current condition as it was to deliver to our readers academic discussion examining its vagaries.

Frank Tough’s article “From the ‘Original Affluent Society’ to the ‘Unjust’ Society” provides an account of the literature on the economic history of Native people in Canada, and highlights some of the areas in which scholars have either neglected the roles that Native people have played in the Canadian economy or have oversimplified the economic relationships between Natives and Whites.

The thematic emphasis of this review relies on commercialization and the processes in which the market system shaped Indian/White relations. Tough's review examines a variety of data sources, empirical studies, and methods while making the case that numerical data is needed for reconstructing past economies and that it is vital for conceptual clarity.

Yale Belanger traces the economic development of the Opaskwayak Cree Nation (OCN) located nearby The Pas, Manitoba. Belanger highlights how after years of economic marginalization following the near-collapse of the Cree traditional economy resulting from hydro-electric development projects the Band Council became economically proactive at the end of the 1960s. Beginning with the Band Council accepting responsibility for a handful of devolved federal programs and establishing a small trucking business, the OCN economy has consistently grown during the last thirty-five years to include a casino, a luxury hotel, and a shopping mall, among other business, and has become one of the region's largest employers.

Isobel Findlay and John Russell consider the questions of what has been achieved in Aboriginal economic development, how success is measured, and what barriers persist. Specifically they examine the colonial history of mainstream accounting measures and assesses initiatives associated with the triple bottom line — economic, environmental, and social performance measures. Specifically, Findlay and Russell consider what triple bottom line reporting might offer Aboriginal economic development and what Aboriginal values and practices might add to thinking on the triple bottom line to make such measures more supportive of sustainable futures for all of us.

Ralph Matthews and Nathan Young turn their attention to Aboriginal community of Lax Kw'alaams, a small Aboriginal community in north-western British Columbia. A recent turnaround in its local economy has occurred resulting from innovative land and resource management practices, as well as the entrepreneurial pursuit of new tenure rights and markets for product. Juxtaposing staples and dependency theories with Lax Kw'alaams economic success, Matthews and Young challenge accepted orthodoxies about rural development.

In his essay "The Cultural Backdrop for Economic Development Activities in the Western Hudson Bay Region," Brock Junkin stresses the need to take into consideration and integrate into federal economic development policies and initiatives an understanding of the cultural characteristics of the region's Aboriginal populations. Due in part to the fact that traditional Aboriginal views on economic development do not always lend themselves to traditional western views on economic development, Junkin argues that past bad experiences resulting from these inherent differences could have

been avoided and that future development initiatives involving the Inuit and First Nations must consider Aboriginal perspectives if they are to be successful.

Christina Dowling provides a thoughtful critique of the work of Stephen Cornell and Joseph Kalt, co-founders of the Harvard Project on American Indian Economic Development. As she herself admits, “the project has become something of a benchmark for current discussion of First Nations economic development.” But as her discussion illustrates, perhaps academics have been too quick to embrace Cornell and Kalt’s frameworks and conclusions, which have in many instances gone uncritically accepted.

Finally, anthropologist Martin Whittles profiles the economic and political response of Inuvialuit communities, organizations, and peoples, to changes in their renewable resources (specifically Muskoxen, Caribou, and White Fox furs) and corresponding harvesting activities.

The articles in this section provide important clues to the questions posed in our call for papers. Overall, we are provided with additional information that the Aboriginal economy is indeed interesting, unique, diverse, and growing. Further, we are assured that many people, organizations, and communities involved in the Aboriginal economy are becoming very successful and are extremely competitive. The activities of those involved are intimately grounded in a larger historical reality: a political and cultural reality that has shaped and reshaped the formation and structure of this economy.

While some of the economic activities that are covered occur in isolated communities — seemingly unaffected by the global economy, other activities are obviously closely connected and dependent on larger economic and political-cultural environments and networks. And, increasingly, leaders, managers, economic development officers, and community members, among others, are strategically promoting change in local, regional, national, and global economic systems. Most important, not only are these players actively involved in the varied economic systems, they are also proactively challenging and redefining them.