

# DEVELOPING COMMUNITIES IN NORTHERN SASKATCHEWAN

## *Women and Youth in Aboriginal Community Development*

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### ABSTRACT

*Scholars interested in Aboriginal community development have paid little attention to the important roles and contributions of women and young people. An extensive quantitative survey — the first such survey undertaken — provides valuable insights into the views and activities of Northern Saskatchewan Aboriginal residents. By assessing the extent of community participation and the support of residents for community engagement, this study demonstrates a deep and broad commitment to working at the community level. The study also shows stark differences between on- and off-reserve populations: on-reserve members have a very homogenous pattern of community engagement, while off-reserve Aboriginal people demonstrate significant differences by age and gender. These findings have important implications for the understanding and implementation of Aboriginal community development.*

### INTRODUCTION

Aboriginal people in Canada's resource-rich provincial Norths find themselves in the midst of a widespread economic boom, one that has brought comparatively few benefits and many challenges to their communities. Northern Saskatchewan, for example, has attracted growing

interest. Corporations have broadened their mineral exploration activities, undertaken early stage oil sands development, expanded existing uranium and gold mines, sustained forestry operations, and developed plans for extensive hydroelectric development. The Province of Saskatchewan stands to benefit from expanded pro-

vincial revenues, improved corporate returns and an expanding market for skilled trades (Northern Labour Market Committee, 2009). In many ways, Northern Saskatchewan demonstrates significant potential for broadly-based Aboriginal community and economic development. However, a fundamental disconnect in terms of the ability of the Aboriginal workforce to meet regional labour demand has taken the edge off the promising opportunities of early 21st century regional development.

The benefits from rapid economic and resource development are not evenly shared. Aboriginal communities in the region experience high rates of unemployment, rising costs, poor educational outcomes and a broad range of socio-economic pathologies. One-quarter of all income in the region (compared to a province-wide average of 16%) comes from assistance programs. As a crucial regional labour force assessment reported, educational attainment in the North lags behind provincial educational attainment levels (Northern Labour Market Committee 2009). Skilled Aboriginal people have no difficulties finding work: the unemployment rate for Aboriginal people with a university degree is only 3%, below the provincial average for all residents. Yet those without at least a high school education face an unfriendly labour market: close to one-third of working age Aboriginal people without a high school diploma are unemployed (Northern Labour Market Committee, 2009: 8), and the unemployment rate soars much higher in the winter months. And while many Aboriginal people have difficulty finding wage employment, Northern Saskatchewan has serious difficulties finding and retaining workers, as “the local labour force often cannot meet industry demand — jobs often require higher education” (Northern Labour Market Committee, 2009: 5). Simply put, the employment benefits of the booming economy are not filtering down to the Aboriginal communities.

For Aboriginal leaders and government officials alike, successful Northern economic development requires training, workforce engagement and entrepreneurial activity. But these ends cannot be achieved without strong communities. Well-functioning communities underpin economic engagements, and improving conditions at the community level is clearly key to any long-term strategy for regional success. This raises ques-

tions, therefore, about community capacity, the nature of Aboriginal participation and interest in community affairs, and the most appropriate means of encouraging greater community engagement.

Discussions of community development often focus narrowly on formally structured programs by nonprofits, social enterprises and cooperatives. This narrow focus on organized or structured involvement is not sufficient for understanding the situation in Northern Aboriginal communities. The full range of Aboriginal community activities are not captured by what is, in effect, an institutional approach to community, and the informal networks and activities that are vital to a community’s wellbeing are generally missed by this narrow definition. As Silver et al. (2006) argue, Aboriginal community development must be defined in Aboriginal terms, not in the institutional and structural terms that are common for non-Aboriginal communities. Conventional measures of community development are often limited in that they are, on the words of Findlay and Wuttunee, “insufficiently respectful of Aboriginal values, the aspirations and needs of communities on and off reserve, and the particular contributions of Aboriginal women” (2007: 5). This is problematic, as community development strategies that fail to incorporate Aboriginal understandings of community and Aboriginal cultural values will miss key opportunities and challenges. As Cornell and others have argued, successful Aboriginal economic development depends in part on a ‘cultural match’ between governance institutions and community values and beliefs (Cornell & Kalt, 1993; Cornell, 1998; Minore & Katt, 2007).

Furthermore, a narrow definition of community development can lead researchers to overlook the roles that women and youth play in Northern Aboriginal communities. Scholars often assert that women play “invisible” roles in the functioning and development of their communities (Silver, 2007). The neglect of women’s community engagement may reflect methodological choices (Lowndes, 2004; Harell, 2009), as studies of community development and social capital typically focus on engagement in formal institutions. Scholars have also been reluctant to apply feminist perspectives to community development; the insights from this research emphasize the complex role of informal networks and contri-

butions by women (Leavitt, 2003). Overlooking women's roles can readily lead to the exclusion of these groups from the evaluation of community development processes; indeed, Silver argues, "The voices of women, and Aboriginal women, are often ignored in planning community development" (2007: 2).

The role and situation of Aboriginal youth is even more invisible. Obviously, young people represent the community leaders, workers and entrepreneurs of tomorrow, and understanding the attitudes of Aboriginal youth toward community engagement and their participation in community events and processes is fundamental to any long-term strategies for local development and community engagement. Yet in the literature, community participation by Aboriginal youth has been largely ignored. For the most part, research on Northern Aboriginal youth focuses on education and social challenges, including such issues as teenage suicide, poor educational outcomes, pre-adult sexual behaviour and drug and alcohol abuse. This research gap is problematic.

A comprehensive approach to community development must incorporate the formal and informal participation of Aboriginal women and youth and must look beyond current activities to determine the underlying assumptions and attitudes toward community held by these two crucial groups. Community development, for the purpose of this study, is defined in broad terms, and is considered to be the manner in which Aboriginal members participate in and support activities designed to develop their communities.<sup>1</sup> This inclusive definition better reflects Aboriginal understandings of community and measures more effectively the contributions of Aboriginal women and youth. Furthermore, the broad definition of community development is consistent with the scholarship that argues that community involvement and engagement provides an important foundation for community economic development (Putnam, 1993; Tolbert, Lyson & Irwin, 1998).

This study uses original quantitative survey data to evaluate the role of women and youth in

Aboriginal community development in Northern Saskatchewan. Northern Saskatchewan serves as an ideal case study for this type of analysis. Saskatchewan's Northern Administrative District (NAD) comprises the top half of the province. It is home to roughly 37,000 people living in about 45 communities consisting of municipalities, reserves, settlements and adjacent reserve/municipalities. As a legislatively, geographically and culturally distinct region, the NAD is an ideal region for Northern and Aboriginal research. Based on the 2006 Census, over 80% (29,085) of the Northern population is Aboriginal (Cree, Dene, Métis). The dominant Aboriginal populations in the North are First Nations (62.3%) and Métis (22%). Dominated by the boreal forests of the Canadian Shield, the NAD has substantial commercially viable natural resources, including uranium, gold, oils sands deposits, and forests. As such, the NAD is the focus of extensive resource exploration, planning and development. The communities within the NAD are, however, constrained by remoteness factors, including limited infrastructure and government services, distances from major population centres, high costs of living, and the relative absence of locally controlled investment funds.

This study is the first extensive investigation of Northern Aboriginal community development. While scholars have considered urban Aboriginal community development, research to date has yet to fully consider Aboriginal community development in remote Northern communities. Northern Aboriginal communities have distinct economic and political histories. They are typically less influenced by federal and provincial government actions, and may be more successful at retaining cultural practices. Given these distinctions, the important lessons researchers have provided about urban Aboriginal engagement are not necessarily applicable to Northern Aboriginal community development.

The use of quantitative data provides the additional opportunity to explore the nuances and broad characteristics of Aboriginal women and youth participation in community develop-

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<sup>1</sup> Community involvement is an important component of social capital. For an excellent discussion of measuring social capital in Aboriginal communities, see Mignone, 2003.

ment. Much of the existing scholarship on Aboriginal community development relies on qualitative and interview-based data. These studies provide richness of detail, but are limited in their ability to draw conclusions about broader patterns of behaviour or to distinguish between subgroups within Aboriginal communities (such as gender, age or Aboriginal status cohorts). While quantitative data are available on community involvement in the Canadian population as a whole (Hall et al., 2009), national studies of community engagement typically have only a small number of Aboriginal respondents, rendering meaningful analysis of gender, age and Aboriginal community engagement impossible. The more nuanced understanding of the role of women and youth in Aboriginal community development emerging from this analysis should inform ongoing policy efforts by Aboriginal and other governments relating to Aboriginal community development.

## WOMEN, YOUTH AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

Women and youth are critical to the future of Aboriginal community development. Aboriginal women, in particular, are ideally situated to act as change agents in their communities, a reality has been recognized in international development efforts, such as the United Nation's International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), which focuses on developing the capacities of indigenous women. Women are seen as being closest to the community; as Silver asserts, "it is often the women, and especially Aboriginal women, who best understand the needs and capacities of their communities" (2007: 2). The centrality of women to the lives of their children and grandchildren means that their potential influence is vast: "Women's activism has been crucial to building and sustaining urban Native communities, not only through their direct participation in the overt politics of social movements, but through their particular roles around the organization of family, social life, sustenance, shelter, and the maintenance of culture" (Krouse & Howard-Bobiwash, 2003: 489).

Research suggests that Aboriginal women are critical to community success. Krouse (2003: 533) asserts that "[w]omen's activism, while less

visible [than men's], has been crucial to sustaining Indian communities.... Silver et al. (2006: 2) found in their study of community development in Winnipeg that "much of this community development work, although not all, is being done by Aboriginal women. It is Aboriginal women who are, for the most part, the leaders in conceptualizing and putting into practice a distinctly Aboriginal form of community development." Further, Aboriginal women are argued to bring unique qualities to community development. According to Weibel-Orlando (2003, 499), "Native American men and women have, since the initial days of urban Indian activism and community building, differed with regard to strategies of activism, community service interests and involvement, education, and self-identity." In particular, Aboriginal men and women may differ in their priorities and community agendas, with women's agenda potentially being "more pragmatic, localized, and service-oriented" (Weibel-Orlando, 2003: 496).

While the importance of Aboriginal women to community development has been explored (particularly in the urban setting), systematic studies about the role of Aboriginal youth are not yet available. Leaders speak eloquently about the future role of today's youth, but researchers have made few attempts to evaluate their attitudes toward community and to determine the possible trajectory of youth participation in community affairs. Research reveals much more about negative or problematized behaviour (school dropouts, teenager sexual activity, drug and alcohol use, youth imprisonment) of Aboriginal youth than about community-building activities (participation in community organizations, support for community events and the like). This focus on the negative ignores the tremendous opportunity present in Northern Aboriginal youth. National (general population) research suggests that young people (aged 15–24) are more likely than older cohorts to participate in formal and informal volunteer activities (Hall et al., 2009: 38, 51, 56). If relevant in the North, this pattern would represent a significant advantage for Northern Aboriginal community development, as young people make up a large proportion of Northern Aboriginal communities. Indeed, 43% of the NAD population (of which over eight in ten residents are Aboriginal) is under the age of 20, and the median age is 23

years (Saskatchewan First Nations and Métis Relations, 2008; Northern Labour Market Committee, 2009).<sup>2</sup> A high level of engagement by Northern Aboriginal young people in their communities would thus translate into greater total number of people participating in community development.

It is also possible that the unique cultural influences in Northern Aboriginal communities could reduce or eliminate age differences in community development. Traditional Aboriginal cultures placed considerable emphasis on values of communalism, consensus decision-making, sharing, mutual aid and equality (see Poelzer & Poelzer, 1986, 3; Lithman, 1984; Brizinski, 1998; Leacock & Lee, 1982). While some argue that these values and norms are lost in modern Aboriginal communities (Boldt, 1993: 176–177), others assert that these values remain important (Wiseman, 2007: 106–7). The isolation of Saskatchewan's Northern Aboriginal communities required their residents to work together and rely on each other. Northern remoteness helped to reduce (but did not eliminate) the influence of 'modern' and 'European' cultures and economies on traditional Northern Aboriginal community values and political culture. Given this, age and gender differences in community involvement may be small, particularly for reserve communities.

## METHODOLOGY AND DATA ANALYSIS

Original quantitative survey data, collected between November 9 and December 21, 2010 by Probe Research on behalf of the survey team, allow for the examination of the relationship between gender, age and community development in Northern Saskatchewan. The survey questionnaire received ethics approval by the University of Saskatchewan. The research team presented the research plan to Northern Aboriginal communities before conducting the survey and received written support from the Prince Albert Grand Council and Meadow Lake Tribal

Council. Northern Aboriginal leaders were given a month's notice prior to start of the actual survey and they were reminded of the project's objectives. Prior to the survey, the principal investigator was interviewed in Cree and English on MBC Radio (Missinipi Broadcasting Corporation), an Aboriginally-owned and operated radio station that broadcasts throughout Northern Saskatchewan. Additionally, advertisements about the survey in English, Cree and Dene ran on MBC Radio from November 1, 2010 until December 10, 2010.<sup>3</sup>

The survey was administered in English, Cree and Dene. A total of 505 Aboriginal respondents were interviewed: 214 identified themselves as Status Indians living on-reserve, 103 as Status Indians living off-reserve, 21 as non-status Indians, 161 as Métis, and two as Inuit.<sup>4</sup> For the purposes of this analysis, the Aboriginal population was divided into two categories: on-reserve and off-reserve (including Status Indians living off-reserve, non-status Indians, Métis and Inuit). Survey results can be expected to be accurate within  $\pm 4.30\%$  for the Aboriginal population in the Northern Administrative District, 19 times out of 20. Data are weighted to match the NAD's gender, ethnicity and age profiles. Young people (aged 18–24), those without a completed high school education, and the non-working population are underrepresented in the sample; this is consistent with the research methodology, as landline telephone survey research is limited in its ability to access individuals who do not have landline telephones (e.g., young people with cell phones and those who cannot afford telephones) and individuals who are often away from their landline telephones (e.g., individuals working on trap lines).

The project examined three dimensions of community engagement. First, researchers considered attitudes toward community engagement and Aboriginal culture. Respondents were asked, "In your opinion, how important is it that individuals be involved in community events and activities?" Respondents were also asked, "How

<sup>2</sup> In contrast, for Saskatchewan as a whole, 27% of the population is under the age of 20 and the provincial median age is 39.

<sup>3</sup> There were over 30 advertisements, ranging from thirty seconds to one minute in length. The time schedule for advertising was spaced equally, with ten spots in each of the time periods from 6:00 pm — midnight; 1:00 pm–3:00 pm and 3:00 pm–4:00 pm.

<sup>4</sup> The survey also included an additional 337 non-Aboriginal respondents, and 13 respondents who either refused or were unable to identify with any category. These 350 respondents are not included in the analysis presented in this paper.



important is it that Aboriginal communities maintain traditional ways of life?" For both questions, response categories included very important, somewhat important, not very important and not at all important. Second, the research assessed community engagements as reported by respondents. Survey respondents were asked if they engaged in a number of community development activities "done as a part of a group or organization, other than your work or employment, in the past 12 months".<sup>5</sup> The seven activities considered included canvassing, campaigning or fundraising; serving as a member of a board or committee; organizing or supervising any activities or events for a school, church or other organization; volunteering for a Band event (asked only of Band members); teaching or coaching; providing care or support, including counseling or friendly visiting; and sharing traditional foods, such as moose meat or fish, with others. (Sharing traditional bush foods is a significant Northern Aboriginal community activity that demonstrates local knowledge and promotes cooperation, collective effort and respect for the land and its resources (Tobias & Kay, 1994; Ballantyne et al., 1976).) Responses were coded as yes and no. The community involvement questions did not cover all possible forms of local engagement but did include activities of considerable importance to Northern communities. Third, the responses to the seven community involvement questions were totaled to create a scale ranging from zero to seven. Individuals who reported doing none of the seven specified activities score a 'zero' on the scale, while individuals who reported doing all seven of the activities score a 'seven.'

The survey — the first of its type undertaken in Canada — allows for a comprehensive assessment of community engagement by Aboriginal peoples in Northern Saskatchewan. The data allowed for differentiation by age, ethnicity and gender, and by on- and off-reserve populations. Given the importance that Aboriginal leaders and government officials assign to community

engagement as the foundation for healthy and healing communities, the survey allows for an evaluation of key social and personal factors in determining the extent and nature of community participation. Understanding these factors could eventually permit the development of improved strategies for promoting and sustaining community engagement practices in Northern Aboriginal communities. While the analysis has theoretical and conceptual importance, its primary value lies in assisting Northern Aboriginal communities with their ongoing efforts to rebuild social cohesion, address economic challenges and improve cultural outcomes through community engagement.

### Community Engagement Attitudes

Eighty percent of all respondents, both on-reserve and off-reserve, indicated that community involvement was "very important" (Tables 1 and 2). Women were more likely than men to state that community involvement is very important, although the gender difference is only statistically significant in the off-reserve cohort. Age differences are also found: for the on-reserve population, respondents aged 18–29 were considerably less likely to consider community involvement to be very important, while in the off-reserve population, respondents aged 45–64 are more likely than other age cohorts to see community involvement as very important.

Variations are also seen with respect to attitudes about the importance of maintaining traditional Aboriginal ways of life. On-reserve respondents were slightly more likely to state that this is 'very important'. On this question, there is no difference between on-reserve men and women, but a gender difference is found in the off-reserve population: almost nine in ten women and three-quarters of men stated that maintaining traditional ways of life was very important. Age differences are again observed. In the on-reserve population, fewer than 80% of respondents aged 18–29 rate maintaining traditional ways of life as being very important, com-

<sup>5</sup> These self-reported behavioural questions were adapted from indicators used in Statistic Canada's Canada 2000 National Survey of Giving, Volunteering and Participating (NSGVP) and 2007 Canada Survey of Giving, Volunteering and Participation (CSGVP). The specific questions adapted from the 2000 NSGVP are FV1\_02, FV1\_05, FV1\_07, and FV1\_08. The specific question adapted from the 2007 CSGVP is FV\_Q04. As the NAPC survey sought to measure community involvement broadly, and not just volunteer activity, the questions were adapted to eliminate emphasis on unpaid activities.

**TABLE 1**  
Community Attitudes and Demographic Groups, % 'very important', On-Reserve Only

	<i>Total</i>	<i>Gender</i>			<i>Age</i>				
		<i>Male</i>	<i>Female</i>	<i>Sig</i>	<i>18-29</i>	<i>30-44</i>	<i>45-64</i>	<i>65+</i>	<i>Sig</i>
Community Involvement	76.6%	72.2%	81.1%	n.s.	64.4%	83.6%	85.9%	100%	***
Maintaining Traditional Life	85.9%	85.0%	86.8%	n.s.	76.5%	92.6%	90.1%	100%	***

\*  $p > .05$ ; \*\*  $p > .005$ ; \*\*\*  $p > .001$

**TABLE 2**  
Community Attitudes and Demographic Groups, % 'very important', Off-Reserve Only

	<i>Total</i>	<i>Gender</i>			<i>Age</i>				
		<i>Male</i>	<i>Female</i>	<i>Sig</i>	<i>18-29</i>	<i>30-44</i>	<i>45-64</i>	<i>65+</i>	<i>Sig</i>
Community Involvement	77.1%	71.4%	82.9%	*	73.8%	74.5%	85.4%	68.4%	***
Maintaining Traditional Life	80.9%	73.9%	87.8%	**	81.5%	83.0%	83.5%	62.2%	***

\*  $p > .05$ ; \*\*  $p > .005$ ; \*\*\*  $p > .001$

pared to over 90% of respondents aged 30 and over. Age differences follow a different pattern in the off-reserve population, where respondents aged 65 and over are less likely to state that maintaining traditional ways of life are very important.

### Community Engagement Types

Turning to reported community engagements, strong majorities of on- and off-reserve respondents reported sharing traditional foods and providing care and support to others, with rates on both activities being higher in the on-reserve population. Participation rates drop for more formalized community involvements, such as canvassing, campaigning or fundraising, and serving as a board or committee member.

Important differences are seen between the on- and off-reserve populations. In the on-reserve population, very few gender or age cohort differences were found to be statistically significant: on-reserve women are more likely than on-reserve men to report providing care or

support, and participation on boards and committees is higher among the 30-44 and 45-64-year-old age cohorts (Table 3). With the exception of these two activities, on-reserve residents report similar types of community involvements, regardless of gender and age.

Larger variations by age and gender were found in the off-reserve population (Table 4). Women and respondents aged 65 and older are less likely to report sharing traditional foods. Off-reserve women are more likely than off-reserve men to report providing care or support, or organizing or supervising events. Off-reserve residents aged 18-29 are less likely than older cohorts to report serving as a board or committee member, and off-reserve residents aged 30-64 are more likely to report teaching or coaching.

### Community Engagement Levels

The number of community engagements also reveals some important patterns (Table 5). Again, demographic variations are greater within

**TABLE 3**  
Community Involvement and Demographic Groups, On-Reserve Only

	<i>Total</i>	<i>Gender</i>			<i>Age</i>				
		<i>Male</i>	<i>Female</i>	<i>Sig</i>	<i>18-29</i>	<i>30-44</i>	<i>45-64</i>	<i>65+</i>	<i>Sig</i>
Share traditional foods	89.8%	89.4%	90.2%	n.s.	92.4%	90.1%	93.0%	100%	n.s.
Care or support	71.0%	65.9%	76.3%	*	65.2%	70.2%	80.3%	100%	n.s.
Organize/supervise events	51.4%	51.4%	51.4%	n.s.	55.0%	44.3%	60.6%	50.0%	n.s.
Volunteer band event	42.5%	42.3%	42.7%	n.s.	36.4%	43.3%	54.4%	36.4%	n.s.
Teach or coach	40.4%	42.2%	38.5%	n.s.	35.9%	41.3%	52.1%	25.0%	n.s.
Canvassing, campaigning or fundraising	30.4%	25.1%	35.8%	n.s.	24.2%	35.5%	39.4%	25.0%	n.s.
Board/committee member	27.4%	28.9%	25.9%	n.s.	18.3%	32.0%	39.4%	25.0%	*

Only Band members were asked about band activities. \*  $p > .05$ ; \*\*  $p > .005$ ; \*\*\*  $p > .001$

**TABLE 4**  
Community Involvement and Demographic Groups, Off-Reserve Only

	<i>Total</i>	<i>Gender</i>			<i>Age</i>				
		<i>Male</i>	<i>Female</i>	<i>Sig</i>	<i>18-29</i>	<i>30-44</i>	<i>45-64</i>	<i>65+</i>	<i>Sig</i>
Share traditional foods	78.2%	82.5%	73.8%	*	85.2%	77.6%	80.8%	51.4%	***
Care or support	65.4%	56.4%	74.5%	***	68.8%	65.4%	65.0%	59.5%	n.s.
Organize/supervise events	46.7%	36.5%	56.9%	***	35.2%	48.1%	54.4%	48.6%	n.s.
Volunteer band event	33.1%	39.1%	28.4%	n.s.	42.1%	23.3%	31.1%	0.0%	n.s.
Teach or coach	35.0%	32.3%	37.8%	n.s.	20.4%	46.2%	40.8%	24.3%	***
Canvassing, campaigning or fundraising	36.0%	31.9%	40.1%	n.s.	33.3%	41.1%	39.8%	16.2%	n.s.
Board/committee member	32.9%	30.2%	35.6%	n.s.	11.1%	33.6%	49.5%	35.1%	***

Only Band members were asked about band activities. \*  $p > .05$ ; \*\*  $p > .005$ ; \*\*\*  $p > .001$

**TABLE 5**  
Mean (Average) Number of Community Involvements and Demographic Groups

	<i>Total</i>	<i>Gender</i>			<i>Age</i>				
		<i>Male</i>	<i>Female</i>	<i>Sig</i>	<i>18-29</i>	<i>30-44</i>	<i>45-64</i>	<i>65+</i>	<i>Sig</i>
On-Reserve	3.52	3.44	3.60	n.s.	3.26	3.55	4.15	3.58	*
Off-Reserve	3.08	2.84	3.32	*	2.77	3.21	3.44	2.32	**

Only Band members were asked about band activities. \*  $p > .05$ ; \*\*  $p > .005$ ; \*\*\*  $p > .001$



the off-reserve population. Off-reserve women report a higher number of activities than do off-reserve men, while gender differences on-reserve are much more modest. The participation of age cohorts is rather uniform in the on-reserve population (the exception being the 45–64-year-olds, who report a higher number of activities), while in the off-reserve population the youngest (18–29) and oldest (65 and over) cohorts report a significantly lower number of activities than do the 30–44 and 45–64-year-olds. (Looking at the populations as a whole, it must be noted that although on-reserve residents report participating in a slightly larger number of activities than do off-reserve residents, these differences likely do not reflect meaningful participation experiences, as volunteering for Band activities is one of the seven activities considered and off-reserve residents are less likely to be Band members.)

To provide greater precision in identifying the determinants of community involvement, we

turn to regression analysis. The dependent variable is the number of community involvements reported (ranging from zero to seven). Drawing on previous research (Hall et al., 2009: 38), the independent variables included in the model are gender, age, income, education, employment status, and the presence of children in the home. Additionally, self-reported health status is included, as individuals with poorer health status may be less involved in their communities. Finally, the model also includes the community involvement attitudes.<sup>6</sup>

The OLS regression analysis identifies important differences between the on-reserve and off-reserve populations (Table 6). Only one socio-demographic variable—work status—is a significant predictor of the number of community involvements among the on-reserve population. Controlling for all other variables, working individuals report higher numbers of community involvements than do non-working individuals. In

**TABLE 6**  
OLS Regression of Number of Community Involvements

	<i>On-Reserve</i>			<i>Off-Reserve</i>		
	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>Sig</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>Sig</i>
Constant	–2.278	1.475		–2.590	1.137	*
Male	–.126	.237		–.326	.204	
Age	.007	.010		.023	.008	**
Working	1.366	.256	***	.620	.250	*
Children	–.024	.308		.134	.227	
Education	.128	.122		.275	.104	**
Income	–.005	.127		–.101	.100	
Health	–.196	.113		.090	.094	
Impt Community Involvement	1.285	.290	***	.645	.225	**
Impt Aboriginal Traditions	.081	.353		.371	.247	
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	.228			.140		

Only Band members were asked about band activities. Unstandardized coefficients are presented. \*  $p > .05$ ; \*\*  $p > .005$ ; \*\*\*  $p > .001$

<sup>6</sup> The independent variables include: sex (male=1, female=0); age in years; income; education; employment status (working=1, not working=0); children under 18 in the home (yes=1, no=0); health status (poor/fair=1, excellent=4); and ratings of the importance of community involvement and of maintaining traditional Aboriginal ways of life (not at all important=1, very important=4).

contrast, a number of socio-demographic variations are found in the off-reserve population. Working individuals report higher numbers of engagements, and the number of community involvements increases with age and education. Interestingly, in both the on- and off-reserve populations, gender, the presence of children in the home, health status and income are not significant predictors of the number of community involvements reported when other variables are controlled. Turning to the attitudinal variables, for both populations, and as expected, the importance that one places on community involvement is positively related to the number of engagements reported. Somewhat counter-intuitively, however, attitudes about the importance of maintaining traditional Aboriginal ways of life are not significantly related to the number of reported community involvements.

## DISCUSSION

The data demonstrate a number of important variations relating to community engagement within the Northern Aboriginal population. With respect to community development attitudes, on-reserve and off-reserve populations equally value community involvement. The on-reserve population places greater value on maintaining traditional ways of life than does the off-reserve population, which is consistent with their choice of residence. Within the on-reserve population, men and women hold similar attitudes but significant differences are found between age cohorts. Within the off-reserve population, significant attitudinal differences are found between men and women and between age cohorts.

In both the on- and off-reserve communities respondents are more likely to report informal community engagements than more formal engagements. While a number of gender and age cohort variations are found in the off-reserve populations, there are only a limited number of gender and age cohort differences found in the on-reserve population. In short, the on-reserve population is more homogenous in its types of reported activities, while the off-reserve population is more heterogeneous. Put differently, on-reserve residents participate broadly while off-reserve engagement is more focused.

Socio-demographic variations in the number of reported activities were minimal in the on-

reserve population. In contrast, in the off-reserve population women and respondents aged 30–64 reported participating in a larger number of community engagements. Again, the data suggest that community involvement is more homogenous in the on-reserve population and more heterogeneous in the off-reserve population. These findings were confirmed in the multivariate analysis, which revealed only one significant socio-demographic predictor (work status) for the on-reserve population and three significant socio-demographic predictors (age, work status and education) for the off-reserve population. For both on- and off-reserve populations, assessments of the importance of community involvement are a significant predictor of the number of community involvements reported.

These findings have significant policy implications. First, the data demonstrate robust levels of Northern Aboriginal community engagement. Aboriginal people in Northern Saskatchewan are deeply and systematically active in supporting their communities. As governments and businesses strive to develop the North's natural resources, the duty to consult (as mandated by the Supreme Court of Canada for development activities in traditional Aboriginal territories) necessitates dialogue and engagement with Northern Aboriginal communities. Governments and businesses should be mindful of the high level of community engagement, and not enter consultations with an assumption about disengaged Northern Aboriginal peoples. Additionally, the data demonstrate the very high value that Northern Aboriginal residents place upon traditional Aboriginal ways of life and upon engagement with community development. These community values are part of the broader context for Northern economic development, and should be accommodated and recognized in consultation and Northern economic development strategies.

Second, the research provides a guide for areas of emphasis in the promotion of community involvement and the development of volunteers and community activists. Employed individuals, in both the on-reserve and off-reserve populations, report higher levels of community engagement. This makes sense: working people may have greater confidence and thus willingness to be engaged in their communities. They may have larger social networks and thus

more invitations to become engaged. Statistics Canada reports that 60% of the residents in Census Division 18 (which includes the NAD) are not working. Given the relationship between employment status and community involvement, increasing employment rates in Northern Saskatchewan can be anticipated to have benefits not only for individuals but also for the communities and, indeed, the whole region.

Women living off-reserve have a higher level of community involvement than do men, as indicated by the bivariate analysis. Local community organizations and policymakers might consider ways to increase the involvement of off-reserve men. Additionally, given the sizable youth populations in both the on- and off-reserve communities, community organizations and policymakers should promote youth community engagement. This is particularly true given that community involvement draws individuals into networks and develops leadership skills. Overall, opportunities for increasing community engagement are clearly evident from the demographic variations found in the analysis.

## CONCLUSION

Northern Saskatchewan is one of the fastest growing and most promising resource development zones in North America. The richness of regional resources and the southern and international pressures to bring these resources to market have been placing considerable strain on Northern communities. This study demonstrates that Aboriginal people retain a strong commitment to traditional life ways and communities and are actively involved with community activities.

Aboriginal community engagement may be one of the greatest untapped and misunderstood resources in Northern Canada. Aboriginal people care greatly about their culture, values and community conditions. They participate in a broad range of activities and clearly believe that personal engagement translates to social, cultural and economic improvements in their communities. There are untapped resources, particularly among the youth and off-reserve men, and over-extended sectors of the community, principally women. That there are many people not yet fully engaged in community-building activities suggests that there is potential for expanded participation.

That employment is correlated to the level of community engagement supports the observation made by numerous Aboriginal leaders that economic development and job creation is essential for a return to community wellbeing.

The examination of engagement in Northern Saskatchewan challenges long-standing assumptions about Aboriginal participation in 21st century community development. Regional development strategies must take the level of commitment and participation into account and should focus on increasing employment, mobilizing young people for community service, and supporting women in their many and diverse activities. Perhaps most importantly, the research challenges the widely held notion that off-reserve Aboriginals have separated themselves from, if not rejected, their community and Aboriginal values. Instead, the survey demonstrates a regional population with robust levels of community engagement, a deep desire to improve local conditions, and a strong commitment to Aboriginal value and traditions.

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