

# Indigenous Conceptions of Well-Being: Rejecting Poverty, Pursuing *Mino-Bimaadiziwin*

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## ABSTRACT

According to conventional metrics, such as the low-income cut-off and social assistance rates, Indigenous peoples in Canada have disproportionately high levels of poverty. But what does poverty mean from an Indigenous perspective? Drawing on data from the Poverty Action Research Project (PARP)—a five-year partnership between academic researchers, the Assembly of First Nations, and five First Nations communities in different regions of Canada seeking to reduce poverty and improve community health—this paper examines the relational and subjective aspects of poverty and well-being. Our analysis of PARP communities' discussions of poverty and actions to address it suggests that poverty is seen through the lens of what the Anishinaabek call *Mino-Bimaadiziwin*, which describes "living well" in a holistic, multidimensional, and community-centered sense. Interventions to address poverty therefore would be better framed as initiatives to enable the pursuit of a good life, as Indigenous people understand it, and must consider not only the economic impacts, but also the interrelated environmental, political, intellectual, social, emotional, spiritual, and cultural dimensions.

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“Our community is very rich in different ways. Yes, we have challenges and I think we’re not trying to hide the challenges. That’s why I think it’s important for people to come to our territory. Come and see the poor housing, come and see the poverty, come and see the challenges we face with violence. But [World Indigenous Nations Games] is a counter to that....”

“This lifts up. We may be poor in some ways, but we’re rich in other ways, and one of the ways we’re rich is through our culture and ceremony.”

Treaty 6 Grand Chief Wilton Littlechild, 2017 (Quoted in Morin, 2017)

“Yet no one whose opinion deserves a moment’s consideration can doubt that most of the great positive evils of the world are in themselves removable, and will, if human affairs continue to improve, be in the end reduced within narrow limits. Poverty, in any sense implying suffering, may be completely extinguished by the wisdom of society, combined with the good sense and providence of individuals.”

John Stuart Mill, *Utilitarianism*, 1863

## **RICH IN OUR WAYS**

Eabametoong (Ontario) and Opitciwan (Quebec) are two of the five First Nations communities in Canada that participated in the Poverty Action Research Project, or PARP. On one of our early trips to Eabametoong First Nation, a young man told us that although the community has struggled with low incomes, limited job opportunities, substance abuse, and mental health issues rooted in colonial trauma, “we are rich in our ways.” As evidence, he pointed to the “beautiful land around us” that provides the resources necessary for survival and to the language and traditions that Elders worked hard to maintain throughout the residential school era. On our first trip to Opitciwan, an older man, standing at the door of the Band Council offices, asked us why we were in the community. After we told him, he said ironically: “You won’t find anything of interest for you here; we are all rich!” We laughed, and so began a long conversation.

This paper focuses on Indigenous conceptions of poverty. It proposes a preliminary exploration of the question, laying out the groundwork in a way that hopefully can guide a more comprehensive investigation. The paper is organized as follows. First, we introduce the context in which the question emerged. Next, we present an analysis of the definitions of poverty and the approaches to studying it contained in the recent social science literature. The methods, sources, and limitations of the original research on which this paper is based are then laid out. We conclude with the results we have arrived at and the lessons that can be drawn from those results.

### **The Emergence of the Question**

The Poverty Action Research Project, or PARP, was initially conceived at the request of the Assembly of First Nations (AFN) by an expert advisory committee on the eradication of poverty. PARP is a pilot project whose results are intended to be used to guide future actions of the AFN on this issue. As part of its activities, the committee received a five-year research grant from the Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR) and the Institute of Aboriginal Peoples’ Health (IAPH) in 2011. Five First Nations communities from different regions of Canada who were interested in working with the project team were selected from among all those that submitted applications. The five communities were: Sipekne’katik

(Indian Brook, Nova Scotia), Opitciwan (Quebec), Eabametoong First Nation (Fort Hope, Ontario), Misipawistik Cree (Grand Rapids, Manitoba) and T'it'q'et (Lillooet Indian Band, British Columbia). Each community was paired with a team of academic researchers with whom a collaborative research agreement was signed. At the national level, the project was directed by an executive committee comprised of university researchers and representatives of the Assembly of First Nations. The national executive committee met every month via telephone conference calls. The whole team, including delegations from the participating First Nations communities, came together once a year at a plenary meeting. At the local level, the project was directed by a community committee (or sometimes, at the community's request, the Chief and Council working with academic PARP team members) which was responsible for the work to be done, including the development and implementation of a strategic plan that aimed to create a solid economic base, alleviate poverty, and improve the health and well-being of community members. At the end of the PARP pilot project, an evaluation was to be carried out to advise the AFN on possible follow-up actions that would support the fight against poverty among all First Nations in Canada.

The work of the various community committees all began in more or less the same way: before agreeing on the detailed content of a plan to combat poverty, each committee sought to arrive at a shared understanding of the elements of its mandate. This raised several important and interrelated questions around the central question of What is poverty? The answers to this question would determine the orientation of all further action. It is these answers that we report on here, and that we want to analyze in relation to the knowledge available in the academic literature.

## **Knowledge and Poverty**

Poverty is a complex social phenomenon that has proven difficult to define, measure, and address. A common-sense definition focuses on material deprivation seeing it primarily through the lens of economics and alleviated through interventions focused on improving access to incomes. While material deprivation is an important indicator of poverty, the condition is multi-dimensional and multi-causal as the academic literature demonstrates.

### *The Metrics Approach*

Social science does not currently offer a universally accepted definition of poverty. Instead, there are several fragmentary, approximate definitions that are criticized more or less severely, necessarily provisional, and yet quite tenacious. Thus, most descriptive and evaluative studies have been based on such operational concepts as “low income” or the basic “market basket measure”<sup>1</sup> — indicators that allow one to normatively quantify one or another of the characteristics that are commonly associated with the condition of poverty. In truth, however, all such indicators are predicated on an implicit definition which considers poverty solely from an economic point of view.

This kind of quantitative definition fails to grasp the phenomenon in its entirety, much less in its essence. Numerous studies carried out in recent years have attempted to

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<sup>1</sup> The market basket measure is a “measure of low income based on the cost of a specific basket of goods and services” in a given region, including “food, clothing, transportation, shelter, and other expenses” (<http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/75f0002m/2013002/mbm-mpc-eng.htm>).

examine other factors associated with the condition of poverty: multidimensional poverty, characterized by an accumulation of disadvantages; indices of deprivation or exclusion; etc. For example, many European models emphasize both material deprivation and social exclusion, a process whereby certain individuals or groups are prevented from participating fully in their society due to inadequate access to learning opportunities, discrimination, and other factors (Gelot, 2011; Lollivier, 2008; Iceland & Bauman, 2007; Myles & Picot, 2000).

The majority of these studies views these phenomena as complementing the usual indicators, resulting in the development of composite indices and correlation analyses, and leading to conclusions where significant statistical associations tend to be advanced as explanations (Iceland, 2003; Fréchet, Gauvreau, et Poirier, 2011). These studies attempt to achieve a better understanding of the phenomenon by widening the spectrum of the variables examined in order to verify whether these can characterize the situations of economic poverty more or less robustly.

These complex statistical studies, together with the economic approach that they complement, make up the vast universe of the metrics of poverty. By continuing to study poverty using approximate indicators which, in spite of their acknowledged limitations, end up (by analogy) assuming the apparent reality of poverty itself, the metrics approach fails to capture the essence of the phenomenon that one is attempting to understand.

### *The Relational Approach*

These statistical measures are nevertheless revealing. For one thing, they do describe features associated with a phenomenon that we are as yet unable to grasp in its entirety; and as long as that phenomenon is not reduced to these approximations, the measures are useful, for example, in identifying changes and orienting interventions. Moreover, they have utility in helping understand how poverty is constructed particularly when poverty is defined as a relational phenomenon (Messu, 2017).

The relational approach to poverty views it as a form of social bond. In particular, the assistance/dependence relationship is seen as a phenomenon forged by the interactions between institutions and actors, governed by ideologies, and grounded in a given time and place; poverty is a social construction that has a particular configuration and dynamic (Paugam, 2005; Simmel, 1908). This requires setting aside the prevailing view of poverty, including the definitions developed by aid agencies and the indicators used to describe poverty. A search for a definitive definition of poverty would be futile. First, because metric definitions reflect the social consensus of the time, i.e., judgments about the condition of the poor used to construct the assistance relationship; and second, because these consensuses change, following the evolution of the paradigms that determine how societies are governed (Messu, 2017).

The relational approach has shown itself to be very productive in its ability to shed light on facets of the phenomenon that remain neglected in most social scientific writings on the subject. Qualitative and longitudinal studies on food aid (Sabourin, 2017), health inequalities (McCall, 2017), and social dynamics (Anderson, 2017) all suggest that the relational approach has significant potential for achieving a better understanding of poverty. For example, qualitative and longitudinal studies on food aid (Sabourin, 2017) clearly demonstrate that people experiencing poverty construct full and meaningful social relationships based on sharing, and that these relationships are central elements of their material and symbolic life. Such studies, among others, show that a definition of poverty based on the

lack (of income, of consumption) does not tell everything about the phenomenon of poverty (Brunetaux et Terrolle, 2010; Narayan, 2009; Narayan, Pritchett, & Kapoor, 2009; Paugam, 2008, 2005; Valladares, 2006; Gonrad-Delcroix, 2003; Gaboriau et Terrolle, 2003).

### *The Emic Approach*

When poverty is considered as (at least in part) a subjective phenomenon, or one based on the perceptions of the subject, it is no longer defined by a statistical measure compared to a norm, both of which are external to the subject. Rather, it is defined by the meaning that the subject attributes to their own condition, which they may or may not call poverty, regardless of the objective measures of their income or consumption, or the social category to which they belong by virtue of the rules governing the assistance relationship. In this emic perspective, material deprivation no longer defines an absolute condition, but a relative one whose meaning is constructed by the subject, rather than being (entirely) externally imposed. From this perspective, relative deprivation, i.e., the perception of a dissonance between what is valued and what can be achieved given the material means available, is sometimes more painful than the objective material conditions (Booth, Leach, & Tierney, 1999).

If the emic approach goes on to identify such perceptions, it can also lead to objective measures. Perhaps the most comprehensive framework for understanding poverty in this way comes from the Oxford Poverty and Human Development Initiative, which seeks to highlight “dimensions of poverty that are of value to poor people” and takes as its starting point Amartya Sen’s concept of development as a “process of expanding the freedoms that people value and have reason to value” (Alkire, 2007, p. 1):

Although the most widely known measure of human development [the United Nations Human Development Index<sup>2</sup>] includes income, longevity, and education, many have argued that people’s values, and consequently multidimensional poverty, extends beyond these domains. (p. 1)

According to Alkire (2007), the dimensions of poverty include not only income, education, and employment, but also social and psychological factors such as agency/empowerment, physical safety/security, dignity/respect, and subjective well-being. Studies of “well-being” often include a similarly extensive range of measures. The Social Progress Index, for instance, ranks countries according to 54 social and environmental indicators, including GDP per capita, ecosystem sustainability, access to health care, infrastructure, suicide rates, gender equality, attitudes toward immigrants and minorities, and more.<sup>3</sup>

If the measured variables within the emic approach seem to depart from the usual conceptions of economic poverty, could it be because they are closer to a global view of the phenomenon?

These three major approaches to poverty — one employing measures that are deemed objective, another that examines social relations, and a third grounded in the subjectivity of the subjects — are not all represented equally in the social science literature. And generally speaking, they are even less developed in their application to Indigenous conditions.

<sup>2</sup> Using 2014 data, Canada ranks 6th on the UN HDI, but Indigenous peoples in Canada would rank 63rd (Quesnel, 2015).

<sup>3</sup> For more details, see <http://www.socialprogressimperative.org/>

## Indigenous Peoples and Poverty

Although there is no official economic poverty level in Canada, Statistics Canada's low-income cut-off (LICO) describes an income below which families are likely to spend at least 20 percentage points more than average on the basic necessities of food, clothing, and shelter.<sup>4</sup> By this measure, First Nations families are nearly three times more likely to be poor than non-Indigenous Canadian families, with the prevalence of "low income" after tax among persons aged 15 and over being 24.6% for First Nations, compared to 8.4% for non-Indigenous Canadians (AFN, 2009). The gap is even higher among children. Taking household composition and consumer prices into account, it has been estimated that the low-income rate for the Inuit living in the Inuit territories of Canada is 44%, which is about five times higher than for the country as a whole (Duhaime & Édouard, 2015).

The community well-being (CWB) index provides a somewhat broader community-level measure, combining indicators of income per capita, high school and university completion rates, housing quantity and quality, and unemployment and labour force participation rates. Although average CWB scores have increased over time, the average First Nations community still scored 20 points below the average non-Indigenous community in 2006 — the same gap that existed 25 years earlier (O'Sullivan, 2011). As of writing, more than 100 First Nations communities across Canada remain on boil water advisories.

Yet, these measures cannot fully capture the meaning and experiences of poverty for Indigenous peoples. What do we know about the relational and the subjective dimensions of poverty among Indigenous people?<sup>5</sup> How do Indigenous people understand and experience poverty? What dimensions do they prioritize when talking about poverty? How are these dimensions related?

To the best of our knowledge, Indigenous languages do not contain terms that directly translate to "poverty." Poverty is a foreign concept as well as a condition imposed on Indigenous peoples, precisely through the social relations created by colonization — a process that has included the dispossession of lands and resources, the destruction of economic practices by the imposition of a market economy, the usurpation of political authority by the Crown, and the perpetration of a cultural genocide by means of residential schools, the Sixties Scoop, and other colonial practices.

Research that employs subjective approaches to understand the contemporary economic experience of Indigenous peoples still appears to be embryonic. The Indigenous terms used to define what is considered to be a good life could provide an approximation, a kind of inverse image that might serve as a starting point. For instance, the Anishinaabek concept of *mino-bimaadiziwin*, or "pursuit of the good life," means far more than material wealth. According to Melanie Benjamin, Chief of the Mille Lacs Band in Minnesota:

... the good life does not mean making money, buying things, or winning awards. Rather, it has to do with taking care of yourself, your family and your community ... showing love by performing acts of kindness ... having courage to be honest ... getting wisdom through years of listening to others and learning from mistakes ... being generous ... without expecting anything in return. It is living life as a kind, humble member of the community. (Benjamin, 2014, n.p.)

<sup>4</sup> In 2014, the LICO was said to be \$30,792 (after tax) for a two-person household and \$43,546 for a four-person household (<http://www5.statcan.gc.ca/cansim/a05?lang=eng&id=2060091>).

<sup>5</sup> Brazil's Multidimensional Poverty Index, for example, says the dimensions must come from the community.



In short, the good life is well-being in a holistic sense. And the flipside of this could serve, at least tentatively, as a way to conceptualize poverty based upon an Indigenous concept.

In the U.S. context, the American Indian Dream is not an individual dream of becoming a millionaire (Cornell, 1987). For Indigenous peoples, a crucial aspect of “success” is protecting Indigenous sovereignty, honouring treaties, and retaining decision-making control and environmental stewardship in one’s homelands. In sociologist Stephen Cornell’s words, Indigenous nations are “committed to improving the material standard of living of their peoples,” but not at the expense of “group identity, political autonomy, and freedom of cultural choice” (Cornell, 1987, p. 63). From an Indigenous perspective, if attaining a (high-paying) job in the capitalist economy means losing other aspects of a meaningful life — one’s sense of Indigenous identity, family and community ties, ties to the land, political autonomy, language, cultural practices, spirituality — that would simply be another (perhaps deeper) form of poverty. This example shows that, from an Indigenous perspective, poverty is conceived as a total phenomenon, within which social relations are decisive. This other form of poverty, the loss of the fundamental aspects of a meaningful life, is indeed a product of social relations.

Other Indigenous knowledge systems and languages around the world also contain rich, nuanced concepts of well-being or the “good life” that are holistic, multidimensional, and community-centered.

According to Xavier Albo, an Indigenous concept known as *Sumak Kawsay* (Quechua), or *Suma Qamaña* (Aymara) or *Living well* (Duhaime, 2017) was brought to the forefront of government policy in Bolivia and Ecuador at the turn of the 21st century.<sup>6</sup> According to this approach, social life should be based on the harmony between nature and people in their access to and enjoyment of material goods. It assigns pre-eminent value to community life, complementarity, and sharing. *Living well* is opposed to *Living better*, which values accumulation and competition to the detriment of respect for nature and human solidarity, and which privileges notions of progress and economic development over sustainability:

Absolutely all the development programs implemented by governments, NGOs and the Church encourage us to seek a better life, insinuating that by transcending indigenous “poverty” we will gain access to the myriad “benefits of modern life” and development through “market integration.” *Living well* is the opposite of capitalist development [for which] the most important thing is money and gain.... (David Choquehuanca quoted by Albo, 2011; 2012)

*Living well* is based on Aymara and Quechua cosmology, whose principal characteristics are widely shared by other Indigenous peoples. Its central idea consists in needing much less in order to be much more, the antithesis of capitalist development (Sarmiento Barletti, 2012; Bellier, 2009). *Living well* means well-being for everyone including the earth and its biodiversity and combining science and Indigenous knowledge to create sustainable communities that measure progress through a wider set of indicators, including respect for nature and equitable resources for all.

These representations can help us uncover aspects of an Indigenous conception of poverty; that at least is our working hypothesis. In this context, the importance of economic

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<sup>6</sup> The subtle but important distinctions between the Quechua and Aymara terms (and other similar Indigenous concepts) are beyond the scope of this paper.

poverty, as indicated by the usual statistical measures, would therefore be relative. Poverty itself might be expressed in conditions that make “Living well” unattainable.

One challenge of using Indigenous conceptions to discuss and design interventions to relieve poverty is that of de-emphasizing the material aspects of poverty and romanticizing poverty. The Anishinaabek concept of Mino-Bimaadiziwin, like that of the Quechua concept of Sumak Kawsay, does not dismiss the economic or material aspects of life. A good life includes an adequate income necessary to meet one’s needs, but the pursuit of wealth is not the central goal of life and is placed in context of other life and community goals. Albert Marshall, a Mi’kmaq Elder, has developed the idea of ‘two-eyed seeing’ as an ethical approach to knowledge that allows and indeed encourages the use of both western and Indigenous knowledges to understand such social phenomena.

## SOURCES AND METHODS

In the discussions that took place in each of the PARP communities when local committees were being formed and when the strategic plans were being elaborated, it became clear that the term “poverty” did not have a single, unique meaning. On the contrary, its meaning was imprecise, was often misunderstood, and corresponded to several different realities. The First Nations community representatives testified to this at the annual national meetings, as we will see. In most communities, decisions about the orientation to be given to the PARP project were not based on an explicit definition of poverty, but on first-hand information about the challenges facing the community, the resources available to it (including the PARP project itself), and the opportunities that might arise. In certain communities, deliberate consideration was given to the nature of poverty as the strategic plan was being developed. We can also deduce certain dimensions of poverty from the content of the strategic plans and from the concrete actions that were carried out, since these implicitly contain a vision of the changes that are needed to improve community conditions. In other words, by identifying the problems to be tackled as well as what needs to be built, they provide a tacit definition of poverty.

The results presented here are based on data created over the course of the entire PARP project (2011–2017).<sup>7</sup> After pooling reviews of the literature that each of us initially carried out independently, we combined the pertinent excerpts from the notes we had gathered during our work with the community committees.

We also solicited the project participants, principally the members of community committees, in order to learn their views. Indeed, after many working meetings (annual national meetings, monthly meetings of the national executive, and meetings of the community committees), it became clear that the vagueness surrounding the concept of poverty constituted a recurrent and fundamental issue that had to be openly addressed. At the annual meetings, several discussions of this subject took place, and the 2015 meeting included a complete two-hour session devoted to it. Prior to that meeting, we had prepared a short set of questions that we submitted to the participants. They were invited to examine the questions in advance, so that they would be prepared to take part in the planned discussion. In addition,

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<sup>7</sup> For a more detailed overview of the PARP research process and lessons learned regarding community-based research and community development with First Nations, see Dockstator et al. (2017).



the participants had agreed to distribute the questions to the members of their community committees and to send us any written responses they received.

The views reported here are drawn from this set of materials. We have compiled and analyzed them based on the minutes of the annual national meetings drafted by the National Project Coordinator, the answers sent to us *a posteriori* by the community committees, and the notes mentioned above. We also consulted documents that came from the community committees where the subject had been discussed, as well as the minutes of selected meetings and other thematic reports (PARP 2012, 2013, 2014, 2015).

We have attempted to account for this information by placing it into analytical categories. In particular, it appears that all the information can be grouped into four major overlapping and interdependent categories: the physical, mental, spiritual, and emotional dimensions of well-being, as identified in the *Medicine Circle*. Medicine Circle teachings use the medicine circle to present an Indigenous social theory and an Indigenous conception of wellness or wholeness (e.g., Brant Castellano, 2011). Social phenomena are analyzed using these four dimensions or categories. We have therefore chosen to present the information in this way. This choice and its possible implications will be discussed below.

Before turning to the results, it is important to note a few limitations. First, this analysis is not the result of research that was initially intended to answer the question that we have raised here. It emerged out of necessity as a kind of unforeseen but indispensable by-product of a process that had other goals. Nor is it based on a carefully developed research protocol. It grew out of observations made by different researchers in accordance with their own disciplinary and normative categories, and their accumulated baggage of knowledge and experience. All these pieces constitute something of a hodgepodge, in which we have sought to discern meaning and coherence. Our text does not pretend to do anything more than raise a question and propose a tentative answer, in the form of a challenge to the researchers who will follow us, and who will hopefully have the foresight that we were lacking at the outset of the PARP adventure.

## RESULTS

### Flip the Word

At the first meeting of community representatives participating in the project, which took place in Winnipeg in 2012, each delegation was asked to describe its community and present the actions it had undertaken in the project. All the delegations had prepared different presentations in which they outlined the essential characteristics of their community's history, its population, and its political, economic and social organization. Despite the variations, a common feature of all the presentations was the multidimensional approach, which was employed to identify the communities' challenges and the related causes. Thus, in many cases, the delegates evoked, one after another, the high rate of underemployment, high prices, low levels of education and income, and so forth, before listing proposals that were still under discussion, most of which focused on possible projects for economic development and social support. Judging from the meeting minutes, the concept of poverty per se was rarely mentioned, except perhaps during the closing discussion. Some people suggested that the meaning which each community attributes to the terms "poverty" and "economic development" be put on the agenda of a subsequent meeting. For as these terms were employed

and the orientations described, they seemed to convey multiple and at times different concepts, rather than uniform definitions.

The 2013 national meeting in Montreal was not fundamentally different in this regard. Each delegation again presented its community's principal characteristics, this time using data from available statistics or from the preliminary results of a survey designed in accordance with the parameters of the PARP project to serve as the basis for the anticipated action plan. These descriptions continued to focus on a myriad of negative and positive dimensions that would need to be considered in planning future actions. Compared to the inaugural meeting in Winnipeg, however, there were three differences in the content of the presentations and the subsequent discussions, as reflected in the minutes. The first difference was the extent and depth of the colonial-rooted difficulties the communities were experiencing, as reported by the delegations: economic difficulties (low income, lack of jobs, high cost of living, food insecurity); limits to people's autonomy (low level of education, high number of school dropouts, loss of traditional knowledge, restrictive legislation imposed by federal and provincial governments, unpreparedness to cope with economic development); insecurity (political instability, overly close relations between political and economic power, absence of community solidarity, loss of a sense of belonging, lack of freedom, powerlessness in the face of outside actors, i.e., governments, crown corporations or large companies); and finally, fractured cultures (loss of parenting skills, and of links to one's roots, language, beliefs and customs). The second difference at the Montreal meeting was the emphasis placed on the strengths that would be needed to serve as a foundation for strategic planning, e.g., the determination to influence or take advantage of the exploitation of nearby resources, or the importance of preparing young people's future.

Another key element was the clearly expressed desire that the communities themselves define their own strategic plan, contrary to the colonial attitude that decisions be made by others and that communities be deprived of all power. And the third difference was the use of the term "poverty", which was rarely heard at the first meeting in Winnipeg. In Montreal, it was employed in two different ways. First, as a concept that crystallizes a daily reality and impedes any possibility of development. One of the Eabametoong delegates mentioned that poverty is a reality he sees and hears about everyday. Second, the concept was used to emphasize the fact that the reality so named is more complex than it appears at first sight. An Ojibwa representative announced that the community committee intended to formulate its own definition of the concept, so that its actions would be directed towards the appropriate targets. A Misipawistik representative announced that her community committee wanted to replace the concept: because of the stigma attached to it, it poses a major impediment to action, and so it should be replaced by its opposite, something like improving people's well-being.<sup>8</sup> The following is from the minutes of the Montreal meeting:

One of the main challenges of the PARP in her community is stigma involved in the word "poverty". Her people are proud, and they do not want other people to define them as poor. [She] spent many hours speaking with people to help them to flip the word poverty — to try to lift up people and improve the quality of life for every member in the community.

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<sup>8</sup> Indeed, the Misipawistik committee later renamed itself E'Opinitowak, or "giving a hand up."

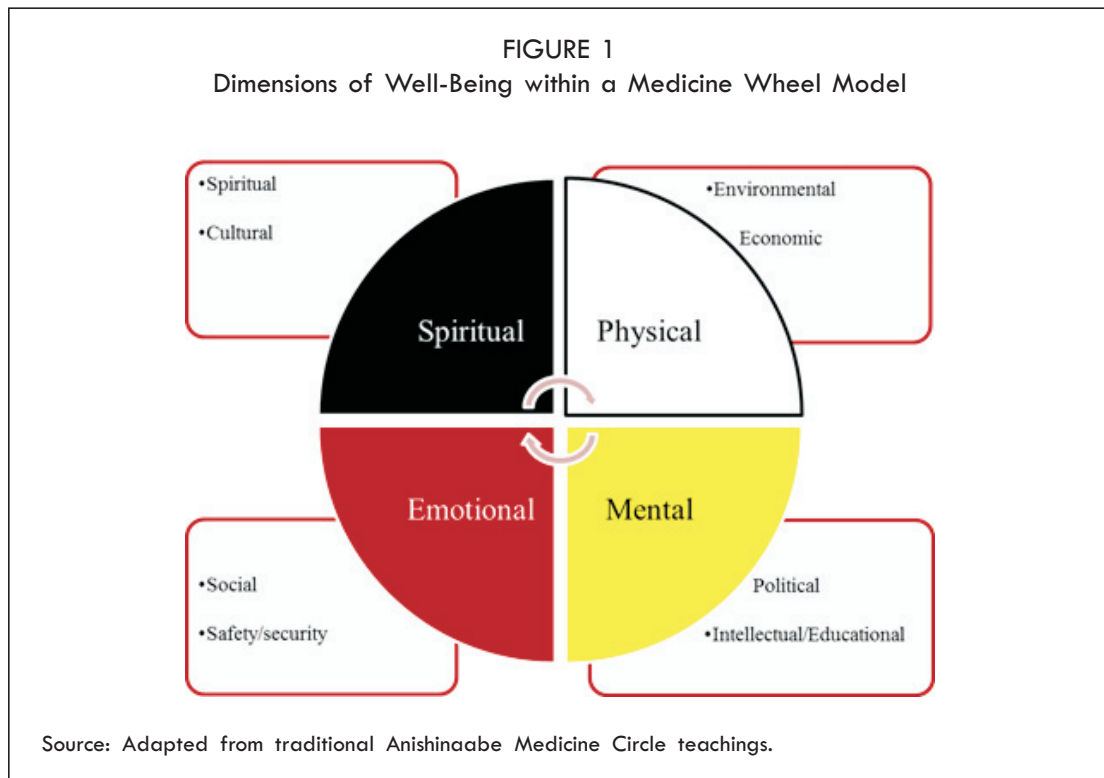
In short, the discussions in Montreal broadened the inventory and understanding of the problems that community committees were beginning to tackle, assessed the strengths that would enable them to wage those battles (above all, the need for in-depth discussions and decision-making autonomy), and called into question the very concept of poverty, even though that same concept was at the origin of the project. The level of detail of the discussions held at this second national meeting certainly attested to the dynamism created by the initial work of the community committees, in our view.

At subsequent annual meetings held in Ottawa in 2014 and in Wendake in 2015, these three discussion points were pursued in depth, most notably the questioning of the notion of poverty, which was the subject of numerous comments. The following were among the new elements brought to the fore. Firstly, the word “poverty” itself is not well received, because it fails to adequately describe the situations that need to be addressed by the communities. Secondly, the communities’ actions should not be constrained by the objectives defined in the research project prior to the inclusion of the communities. This specifically concerns the use of the term “poverty”, which is based on an approach that focuses on deficits and which should be replaced by another concept based on an approach that focuses on strengths, needs, and aspirations, for example. Nor should the communities’ actions be constrained by the administrative standards imposed on the project by the funder, the CIHR. This concerns the limits on allowable expenditures, which favour research rather than community actions, and the needs of researchers rather than those of the communities. There was also a problem with the limits on the duration of the project [initially five years], which failed to consider the time required for community discussions, conducted in the manner in which the communities normally operate. Finally, it was generally accepted that the communities have, in practice, adopted a much broader vision of poverty than simple material deprivation.

What this reveals is the coexistence, within the PARP project team, of different types of knowledge that emanate from different worldviews. We are very familiar with the social scientific view of poverty, which was discussed in the first part of this text. However, we are far less familiar with the way that Indigenous knowledge views that which science calls “poverty”. We will now attempt to shed some light on this.

### **Well-being and the Medicine Circle**

The original significance of the Medicine Circle is the subject of debate (Merriot, 2014; Vogt, 2014; Liebmann, 2002). Many Indigenous peoples in the Americas — including several of the PARP communities — have made use of it, and continue to do so, as a representation of the totality of the world and the interdependency of its components. It has been adapted and interpreted for multiple purposes, on the basis of a common fundamental content comprising four directions, elements, remedies, seasons, dimensions of well-being, colours, and stages of life. In an effort to systematize the elements of Indigenous perceptions of poverty — elements gathered in communities in accordance with the desire expressed at the first annual national meeting in Winnipeg in 2012 — these have been distributed among the four dimensions of well-being represented in the Medicine Circle. This exercise has made it possible to categorize all the elements collected: the positive elements help to define the state of well-being, while the negative elements, which most often represent the inverse, help to define the opposite state, which we might tentatively call overall poverty or ill-being. Let us now examine these results.



### Physical or Material Well-being and Poverty Perceptions

According to the perceptions expressed during the project, access to adequate economic resources is a major dimension of well-being, and material deprivation does represent a major dimension of poverty. Many PARP community members described financial struggles, including the high prices (especially in more remote northern communities) of housing, transportation, food and utilities, lack of job opportunities, low incomes, and high rates of social assistance on reserve. If not for the (often forcible) incorporation of Indigenous communities into a capitalist economy, however, money would have no value at all. As a Misipawistik member put it, “money does not buy happiness.” Nevertheless, access to certain material resources (food, water, shelter, etc.) is necessary for survival.

A mother of three at Opitciwan described saving coupons, rationing ketchup, and purchasing no-name brands in order to feed her family; even then, she said she struggled to do so adequately. An Eabametoong member used the Anishinaabemowin term *koo-tah-key-say-win* to refer to “not having enough to go around or share” — as in a bad hunting season when there is a shortage of game. A Misipawistik member offered a similar term in Cree: *kitimaksewin*. Importantly, the root causes of such conditions are not individual failings but rather historical and structural factors, such as the political decisions and environmental devastation associated with settler colonialism.

A second major dimension of physical well-being and poverty that emerged from the qualitative data is the natural environment. Being well requires clean air, water and soil, and balanced relations with animals, plants, trees, and other forms of non-human life. Without a

healthy ecosystem, there can be no economy.<sup>9</sup> A T'it'q'et member described how the community “lost a great deal of our culture and ways [of providing for ourselves] when Hydro built dams in our territory; it affected our fishing and gathering, the ability to supply our own food.” Other PARP communities similarly described how state-imposed flooding, forestry, mining, and relocations hindered their ability to live off the land in the ways their ancestors had for millennia. Given how closely Indigenous identities, cultures, and ways of life are tied to specific lands and waters, the PARP communities’ strategic plans often specify that economic development should only proceed on the condition of environmental sustainability.

### **Mental and Intellectual Well-being and Poverty Perceptions**

From an Indigenous perspective, well-being, and conversely poverty, also have intellectual and political dimensions. These include the knowledge and skills needed to survive (and to thrive) in their environment, the mechanisms to pass on such knowledge and skills to the next generation, and the capacity for self-determination and decision-making control in one’s homelands.

Consistent with Simmel’s (1965) notion of poverty as a relationship of dependence, some PARP community members described poverty in terms of their community’s current dependence on the federal government for transfer payments. Many criticized the Indian Act (along with various INAC rules and funding caps) as a constraint. Opitciwan members felt further stifled under “third party management.” In some communities, political apathy and a “perceived lack of control” over local decisions have also developed. To address such problems, T'it'q'et reinstated a traditional family head governing council and other measures to empower youth and elders (P'egp'iglha Council, 2007).

For the PARP communities, education is also necessary for securing well-being and eliminating poverty. Nowadays, many say this means both formal Western education as well as traditional knowledge and land-based skills. Although PARP members are concerned about high dropout rates, lack of control over school curricula, under-funding of reserve schools, and the disruption of traditional learning practices as a result of the Indian Residential School system and its legacy, many also describe the recent growth in adult education and specialized skills training, and programs to connect youth with traditional land-based skills — such as the Lake Keepers program at Misipawistik or Ocki Matcatan (“A New Start”) at Opitciwan — as promising initiatives to combat poverty.

### **Emotional Well-being and Poverty Perceptions**

For Indigenous people, education is not simply an intellectual pursuit, or a means of attaining jobs and money. Living well also includes social and emotional dimensions: warm, supportive relationships with family, community, and clan; a sense of belonging; peaceful relations with other communities and nations; and both physical and psychological security, including freedom from violence, but also the feeling of being respected and free.

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<sup>9</sup> As the saying goes, when the last tree is cut, the last fish caught, and the last river poisoned, then it will be obvious that we can’t eat money.

In recent years, some PARP communities have experienced challenges with substance abuse, suicide, and violence, all of which hinder the ability to do well in school, hold meaningful employment, and otherwise provide for oneself and one's family. As has been well documented, these social problems are rooted in colonial trauma, land dispossession/destruction, and ongoing political and economic barriers. Even those who are employed and earning a steady income may be experiencing profound grief. As an Eabametoong member put it:

In the last two years, we faced a homicide, a suicide, sudden deaths due to drug use ... We lost elders to natural deaths [and another community member] in a tragic [snow-mobile] accident. We still have lots of grief to deal with ... It's been a challenge.

While she is grateful for the "great leaders, elders and advisors who keep me going," many PARP communities say they would benefit from more mental health and counselling resources. "Most of all," the Eabametoong member says, "we have to find ways of building trust for each other ... We'd be a strong nation if that trust is built, if we build those bridges back, build back the ways that were lost."

This emphasis on restoring trust and respect was echoed by members of other PARP communities. According to one Misipawistik member, the "shift to individualistic thinking" associated with Western capitalism has impoverished the community as a whole. One way to restore social cohesion and community health, he and others believe, is through cultural revitalization.

### **Spiritual Well-being and Poverty Perceptions**

Indigenous conceptions of poverty and well-being also include spiritual and cultural dimensions: the ability to speak one's language and practise one's customs and traditions; having a wealth of stories, songs, art, collective memories; being true to one's values and principles; and feeling connected to a spirit/creator/life force, something beyond the material realm. Presently, an Opitciwan member believes:

We are poor because we Atikamekw do not know who we are or where we come from. Prior to the residential schools, we had our own values, our own way of child-rearing, but we've become disconnected from ourselves ... we're going through poverty in our thoughts, our minds.

To combat this *mal de vivre* (deep unhappiness), she says, Atikamekw youth must reconnect with their cultural identity and values, learn about their history, and find ways to live in harmony with one another and their environment. Similar to the Anishinaabek concept of *Biskabayaang* (Simpson, 2011), she says: "For us, development is to bring Atikamekw back to ourselves and to develop balance within that."

For many PARP communities, maintaining and revitalizing Indigenous languages is essential to this process. According to a T'it'q'et member, "our stories are written on the land, our language and culture are tied to the land, our clan names and responsibilities stem from it ... and if we keep our responsibilities, we will have a good life." Therefore, he says, many community members are trying to become fluent in their language.<sup>10</sup> A Misipawistik

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<sup>10</sup> Similarly, an Opitciwan member said: "We're wealthy in terms of language, but some words are disappearing" and "young people have a harder time of it".



member further suggested that poverty can be reduced “by doing the ceremonies,” such as naming ceremonies and sweat lodges, which teach basic values, roles, and skills. For a Sipekne’katik member, development is not only economic, but also spiritual, and building new powwow grounds is vital to her community’s well-being.

### **Holistic Worldview and Poverty Perceptions**

In summary, Indigenous peoples often conceive of well-being and wealth and, conversely, of poverty, in holistic, multidimensional, and community-centered terms. Although the relevant dimensions are described separately above, they are all interconnected in practice, according to the views that were shared with us. Cultural riches, for example, may buffer material poverty, but a certain level of material resources is also necessary to practice one’s culture. Although colonial-capitalism has done much damage, an Eabametoong member emphasized that to be happy and healthy, one must honour the Creator, give thanks for the land, air and water, and appreciate the *richness* of the people and places around us:

What makes me feel rich is being in the woods with my grandson and seeing the big smile he has running around on the land, looking at the trees, the berries, the road we walk, the air we feel, the whistling of the wind on my face, the chirping of the birds, whatever we see on the land; that’s richness for me; that’s happiness ...

Such stories challenge conventional Western thinking about poverty. If money and material goods are not so important to an individual or a community, if one is able to hunt, fish and put food on the table, speak one’s language, and have a loving supportive family and a clean natural environment to do the things one needs to do to survive and be happy, is one then living in poverty? From what we have been able to document, the answer would seem to be no. Material deprivation may be a necessary but insufficient component of poverty. Combining several elements belonging to one or more (if not all) of the four dimensions of well-being does not necessarily result in a definition of poverty either. After all, there may be no such thing as poverty in the Indigenous view of the human condition, since the entire worldview upon which it is based does not allow single objects to be considered in isolation.

### **Poverty Perceptions as Revealed Through Action**

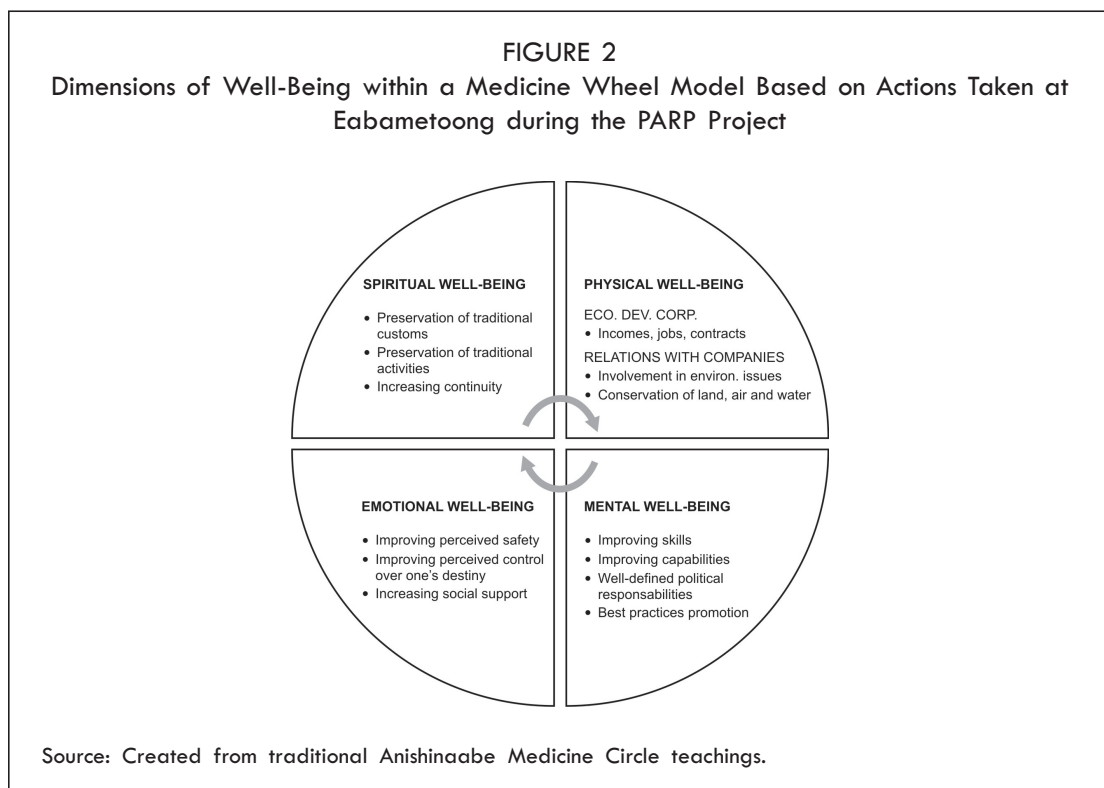
The final section of our results examines the strategic plans and the actions that have been undertaken within the PARP project. Our hypothesis is that these plans and actions can be seen as the concretization of the vision, agreed upon in the local committees, of the changes that need to be implemented to improve community conditions. In other words, they are implicit indicators offering an underlying definition of what must be overcome in order to achieve a state of well-being.

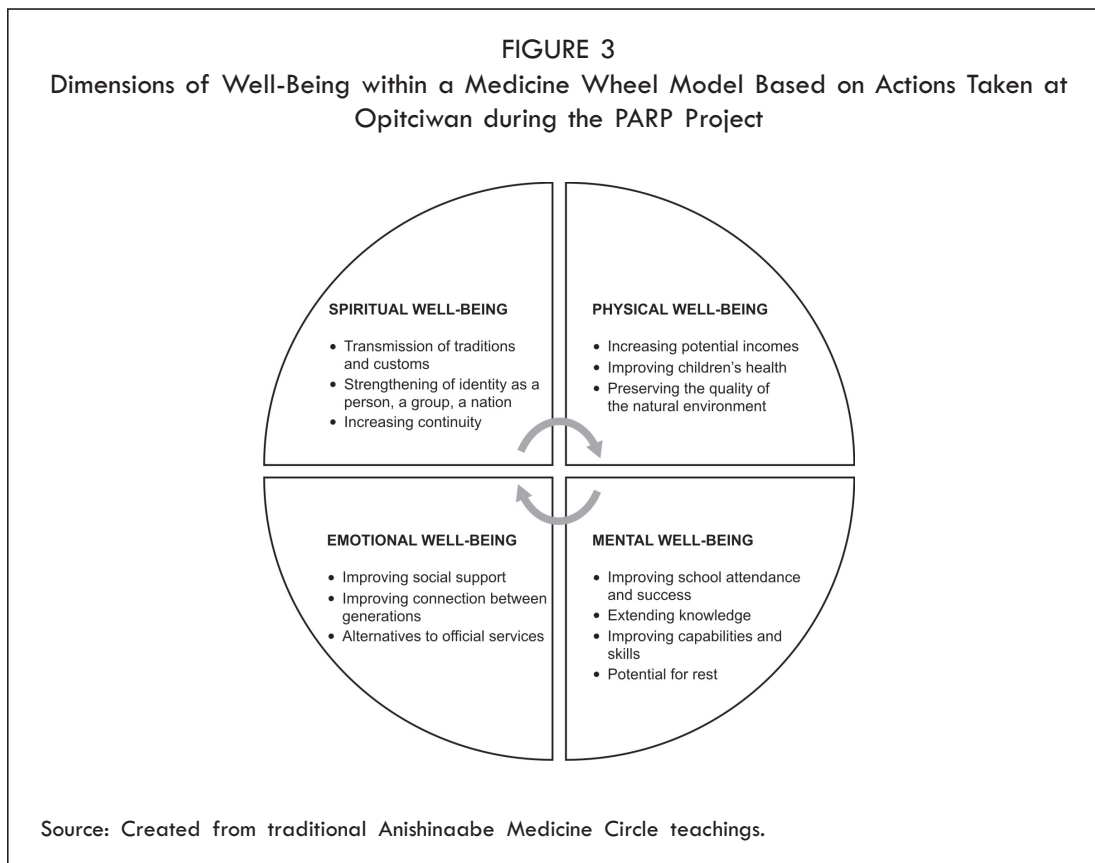
It turns out that the global vision elaborated in the previous sections is highly consistent with the nature of the actions that have been carried out. While each PARP community had its own unique vision and emphases, none of the actions undertaken was ever isolated, affecting only one of the four dimensions of well-being. On the contrary, the actions were always linked together in a way that affected multiple dimensions of well-being. We provide two examples here, but could just as easily have presented initiatives from all five communities: they would all illustrate the same global scope and the same underlying global vision.

In Eabametoong, an Economic Development Corporation was created aimed at influencing the enormous development of the Ring of Fire mining project (Wright, 2014) in a way that will protect the land, air and water and maintain a healthy environment, so that the benefits of that development (jobs, contracts, royalties) can be used to improve the living conditions of community members. The discussions and arrangements concerning the corporation itself, and its relationship with the band council on the one hand, and the mining companies on the other, were meant to reduce the insecurity caused by outside development, and prevent the frictions that can arise from the proximity between economic development and political power. In addition, the actions included the creation of programs to increase community members' skills, e.g., workforce training programs.

In Opitciwan, the committee decided to develop community projects that focused on three priorities: contributing to the overall development of children and families; encouraging the social integration of young people by strengthening their sense of identity and self-esteem; and emphasizing school success on the part of the community's children and youth. To this end, it has introduced a breakfast program in the community's two schools; created a Family House that offers a wide range of activities including a community kitchen, discussion groups, a day-care centre, individual and group training (e.g., in parenting skills), consultations (e.g., in maternal and child health); and set up activities to promote school retention and job training, all of which focus on the acquisition of traditional knowledge and skills and are integrated with the school curriculum.

In these two examples, the actions that have been carried out directly affect each of the dimensions of well-being. Eabametoong's intervention in the large-scale exploitation of the





Ring of Fire primarily targets the physical or material dimension of well-being by ensuring economic spin-offs and environmental safeguards. But it also affects the mental and intellectual dimension by offering the possibility of increasing the employability of community members and by clearly establishing the boundaries between politics and economics. Furthermore, it bears on the emotional dimension by increasing the sense of control over one's destiny, as well as on the spiritual dimension by reinforcing traditional practices and using traditional Indigenous knowledge to inform strategic planning (despite the upheavals affecting the territory). Similarly, Opitciwan's interventions with children, young people, and the family primarily target the mental dimension of well-being by emphasizing class attendance, school retention and academic success, by improving young people's job readiness, and by improving the parenting knowledge and skills of their parents. They also have an impact on the emotional dimension by offering families social support outside of government networks and by favouring closer relations between generations. On the spiritual dimension, they help to re-establish a sense of identity and life meaning based upon traditional principles and connections with the land; and on the physical or material dimension, they help to prevent health problems among young children while increasing the earning potential of young adults.

These examples illustrate how Indigenous views of poverty lead to interventions that effectively impact multiple dimensions of well-being. One dimension may serve as the gate-

way for an action, but the interdependencies among the dimensions produce repercussions that extend beyond those directly targeted, repercussions which are nonetheless deliberate and desirable.

## CONCLUSION

### Two Perspectives

We now have a better understanding of the difficulties involved in precisely defining and measuring the realities covered by the concept of poverty, as well as the uneasiness arising from its use within local committees and in the relations between the committees and other members of their communities. The concept itself does not exist as a distinct notion in Indigenous worldview(s), which explains why it does not have a direct translation in Indigenous languages. But that's not all. These difficulties and this uneasiness resulted from the initial formulation of the PARP project, which imposed the use of the concept using social science terms. In the original project statement, poverty was identified as the principal area for intervention that would help improve the well-being and health of First Nations. From its very inception, the project incorporated a two-eyed seeing approach. On the one hand, the scientific Cartesian perspective, with its compartmentalized approach which proceeds by dividing reality into elementary particles that are examined one by one; an approach that is also cumulative though rarely synthesized. On the other hand, the traditional Indigenous perspective and its holistic approach, which considers reality as an indissociable totality within which each elementary particle only has meaning in relation to all other particles (Little Bear, 2000).

Leroy Little Bear in "Jagged Worldviews Colliding (2000) argues that colonialism has created a fragmented worldview among Indigenous peoples. This helps explain the seemingly fragmented or disjointed character of the discussions bearing on the communities' socio-economic profiles, on the concept of poverty, and on the strategic plans and action plans, as opposed to an approach that might have been more Cartesian and would have produced reports filled with statistical indicators measuring the situation at the outset, calculating the critical thresholds to be reached, the progress achieved at each stage, the situation at the project's end ... In reality, the approach was neither fragmented nor disjointed, but based on an essentially integrated vision that is related to the notion of Living Well, the term used in Latin American, or Mino-Bimaadiziwin, the term used by the Anishinaabek in Canada.

Yet these traditional Indigenous perspectives also encompass scientific knowledge, even if the two perspectives are based on fundamentally different premises. As we observed in the data analysis section above, the conventional perspective recognizes the existence of the material and economic forms of poverty and uses social science approaches to measure things such as insufficient income required to satisfy basic needs. A traditional Indigenous perspective recognizes the emic or subjective forms of poverty, such as the feeling of deprivation, as well as relational forms of poverty, such as being subject to the Indian Act. However, the traditional perspective treats all these elements as being inextricably tied to well-being, or Living Well; and on this basis, it can help to guide action. It is not our intention here to evaluate the merits and limitations of these two types of knowledge, which would require much more extensive reflection. But based on the experience of the PARP project,

both types of knowledge are important and are used to develop and guide interventions within communities. This principle is increasingly recognized within Indigenous communities and increasingly by researchers who seek to work with Indigenous peoples. Mi'kmaq Elder Albert Marshall, for example, argues for the bringing of both sets of knowledge to address complex issues through the ethical frame of 'two-eyed seeing' (Bartlett, Marshall, and Marshall, 2012).

### Lessons Learned

Implementing Indigenous traditional perspectives on poverty reduction in First Nations communities has highlighted the primacy attributed to the holistic impact of each intervention. This implies that each intervention, which aims to enhance a single dimension of well-being, must also consider the impact on other dimensions, because they are all interdependent. If an increase in material wealth comes at the expense of culture or safety or the environment, then well-being becomes even harder to achieve. One may have more cash in one's wallet, but still be poorer, on balance. Enhancing one dimension should enhance the others, or at least not harm them, and it should put things back in balance. This is an important lesson for the fight against poverty, and could be applied well beyond the situation of First Nations in Canada.

This study also raises questions about Maslow's (1954) well-known hierarchy of needs.

Maslow based his model upon interviews with Blackfoot Elders who conveyed to him their idea that self-actualization, both as individuals and as communities, was at the base of the hierarchy, not at the top. The Blackfoot would discuss poverty in terms that relate to individual, community, and cultural actualization rather than in terms relating to material deprivation.

From a Western social scientific perspective, poverty is primarily discussed in material terms, the term that are at the base of the Maslow hierarchy. It is often assumed that satisfying basic material needs is prerequisite to pursuing "higher" needs such as spirituality or self-actualization. The post-materialist thesis (Inglehart, 1977) posits that economic development is associated with a transition from materialist to post-materialist values and that concerns for personal freedom, belonging, participation in decision-making, and sustainability only develop after economic scarcity (low incomes, high prices) has been addressed. So how could it be that some Indigenous people living below the low-income cut-off, without clean running water, and in housing that Statistics Canada considers to be overcrowded nevertheless feel rich? How is it that a project focused on reducing poverty so often found itself focusing on issues of identity, language, culture, and environmental protection? From an Indigenous perspective, these issues are just as important as, and interdependent with, the struggle for food, shelter, and security. It is very much possible to live well without many of the consumer goods that Western social scientists and settlers consider to be "basic." Moreover, Indigenous identities and spiritual practices are very much tied to the land; there is a materiality to them, just as food, shelter, and other material resources not only serve physiological needs but also have deep cultural meanings.

This study allows us to draw another lesson from the experience of the PARP project. The two men we encountered on our first trips to the communities were both right, each in his own way. By resorting to irony, presenting as true something that is false, the older Ojibwan man recognized the reality of monetary poverty in the community. After listing his community's problems, the young Eabametoong man did not conclude that there was

generalized unhappiness, or an imbalance in the way well-being is evaluated in the traditional Indigenous perspective. On the contrary, by evoking the highly valued dimensions of identity, self-sufficiency, and historical continuity, he was affirming the possibility of Living Well. Better yet, he was asserting that, despite the limitations imposed on his freedom, the reality he experienced can be designated otherwise, can be seen as full, or (one might even say) “rich”, because it is socially and symbolically satisfying.

These voices were the first we heard coming from the communities, after the launch of the project. The communities had not been involved in the conception of the project which, as we said, originated with the group of (Indigenous and non-Indigenous) experts convened by the AFN. The activities began without documenting the Indigenous communities’ perceptions of poverty, without understanding the emic version of the concept. The latter would soon manifest itself, however, making it obvious that the project could not be conducted without recourse to the Indigenous worldview(s). Nevertheless, it took us some time to be able to step back and recognize the process that was unfolding in the course of our exchanges, as we attempted to express what each of these two different views of reality allowed us to see. In an ideal world, the starting point of the PARP project should have been a certain comprehension of the Indigenous worldview and its perspective on poverty. In 2017, Indigenous conceptions of poverty led the Eabametoong First Nation, a community considered to be in poverty, to raise \$10,000 to support a not-for-profit shelter in Thunder Bay (CBC News, May 22, 2017). The next project on this subject should certainly take this into account. But then again, in an ideal world, poverty would no longer exist, as John Stuart Mill wanted to believe. Perhaps the use of Indigenous conceptions of poverty would help to create this world. After all, one of the fundamental teachings of a core western text is that people do not live by bread alone.

Indigenous leaders have argued since the publication of *Wahbung* in 1971 by the Manitoba Indian Brotherhood that “we, both Indian and Government, recognize that economic, social and educational development are synonymous and thus must be dealt with as a ‘total’ approach rather than in parts. The practice of program development in segments, in isolation between its parts, inhibits if not precludes, effective utilization of all resources in the concentrated effort required to support economic, social and educational advancement.” Development must not occur in bits and pieces but on the basis of a comprehensive plan. Reducing poverty takes effort on many fronts: health improvement, community infrastructure, protection of lands and resources, human resource development, cultural development, and more. The Brotherhood advocated for use of both Canadian and Indigenous knowledges in this long-term effort, and its vision remains as relevant as ever.

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