

Indigenous Business Support Services: A Case Study of the Quebec Entrepreneurial Ecosystem in Canada

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ABSTRACT

Support services — also known as accompaniment practices and advisory services — are essential for the development of small businesses. In terms of support services specific to Indigenous businesses, the literature is rather silent. Yet, one can expect that the recent and growing market-related entrepreneurial trend in Indigenous communities will generate increasing accompaniment needs in those contexts. The objective of this research is to better understand the entrepreneurial ecosystem and its current synergy, as well as identifying the challenges of Indigenous entrepreneurship. To do so we rely on a qualitative methodological approach, focusing on the Indigenous entrepreneurial ecosystem in Quebec, Canada. Overall, our research highlights the need to adapt support services to Indigenous-related entrepreneurial issues. This research paves the way for a broader discussion related to how local governments, economic development organizations, funding agencies, and business support services organizations can work together for a comprehensive economic development strategy within Indigenous contexts.

INTRODUCTION AND RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

Despite the efforts made by successive governments, the Indigenous populations of Quebec and Canada are still experiencing difficult socio-economic situations, such as high unem-

The term “Aboriginal” refers to First Nations and Inuit peoples. For information purposes, First Nations are made up of 11 distinct nations (Abenaki, Algonquin, Attikamekw, Cree, Huron-Wendat, Innu, Maliseet, Micmac, Mohawk, and Naskapi).

ployment, food insecurity, and lack of local capacity (Canadian Human Rights Commission, 2013; Gerber, 2014; Kulchyski, 2013). Faced with these significant socio-economic problems, entrepreneurship in Indigenous communities has recently emerged as an effective vector for sustainable development, empowerment, and improvement of living conditions, particularly in a context where young people make up 70% of the First Nations population (Kulchyski, 2013). National and international experiences have shown that Indigenous entrepreneurship stimulates the development of local capacities and social innovation and enables Indigenous communities to take charge of their destiny (Peredo & Anderson, 2006; Peredo et al., 2004).

However, the development of Indigenous entrepreneurship faces several challenges that hinder its development, especially in the pre-startup stage (FNQLEDC, 2013). For example, while in Quebec there are many public, parapublic, and private structures designated to help entrepreneurs in their business creation process, their services are not well adapted to the realities of Indigenous peoples (Niska, n.d.). Consequently, these services are not used up to their potential by Indigenous entrepreneurs (FNQLEDC, 2013). In addition to this significant issue of mismatch between supply and demand in terms of services to entrepreneurs, a significant issue arises in terms of entrepreneurial support in the Indigenous context. In this sense, while support services for entrepreneurs are crucial, it is as important to ensure its cultural fit within the context in which it takes place (Chabaud et al., 2010).

The literature tends to agree that Indigenous entrepreneurship is characterized by unique features that may influence the way support services should be designed. In Quebec, for instance, three specific features arise. First, each Indigenous community has its own social, economic, and geographic context, which in turn influences the entrepreneurial ecosystem. Most of Quebec's 42 communities are in rural or remote regions and have fewer than 500 inhabitants (FNQLEDC, 2013). Second, distance from major centres, the presence or absence of road links, and the schooling rate (Secrétariat aux affaires autochtones, 2011), for example, influence the presence or absence of economic opportunities and, therefore, the way economic players are structured and operate. Third, the Indigenous economy is characterized by the multiplicity of objectives pursued, insofar as the contribution of business creation generally exceeds individual economic benefits and tends to benefit the community (Lindsay, 2005; Peredo et al., 2004).

Given these specific features, the central dilemma arises between the standardization of accompaniment approaches, practices, and evaluation tools, and the need for adaptation and flexibility required by Indigenous contexts and realities. In addressing this conundrum, our research builds on the case study of Quebec's Indigenous entrepreneurial accompaniment ecosystem. With these considerations in mind, our research has three objectives: (1) map the profile of Indigenous businesses in Quebec, (2) unveil the barriers that Indigenous entrepreneurs are facing, and (3) analyze the support services' ecosystem synergy. These three objectives allow us to draw broader contributions and insights for Indigenous accompaniment needs.

This paper is structured as follows. First, we present an overview of the literature on entrepreneurial support services and entrepreneurial ecosystems. Second, we introduce our qualitative methodology highlighting the research design, data collection, and analysis processes. Third, we discuss our findings based on the analysis of Quebec's situation from an Indigenous business standpoint. Fourth and last, we draw useful contributions to the literature on accompaniment services and Indigenous entrepreneurship, as well as practical recommendations for local governments and economic development organizations.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Entrepreneurial Support Services

In recent years the literature on entrepreneurship has shown a growing interest in support services (Messegheem et al., 2013; Schmitt et al., 2016). Two main levels of analysis have been investigated. On a micro level, research has been directed towards entrepreneurs, their needs, and the way in which accompaniment meets their needs (Chabaud, Messegheem & Sammut, 2010; Schmitt et al., 2016; Verzat & Gaujard, 2009). On a macro level, entrepreneurship support services have focused on ecosystems, their components (Spigel, 2015), the interactions between them (Isenberg, 2010), and their overall dynamics (Mack & Mayer, 2016).

Entrepreneurial accompaniment is mostly approached as a technique, combining legal, financial, and organizational support services (Chabaud & Brenet, 2019). They can be tangible, like equipment and technology access, or intangible, like knowledge, training, and advice (Vedel & Stepgany, 2011). According to Chabaud and Brenet (2019), accompaniment's success can be understood as the knowledge acquired by entrepreneurs, its instrumentalization into concrete implementation, and the legitimacy and credibility of its integration into the environment. As Verzat and Gaujard (2009) explain it, for the professionals offering accompaniment support services, it involves using their economic knowledge and experience in marketing, sales finance, technical, and sectoral offers, as well as using their professional networks to help for business plan validation and funding mobilization. It also entails that professional support helps entrepreneurs to structure their project ideation in prioritizing their objectives and structuring their process and resources put into it (Verzat & Gaujard, 2009). Therefore, taking into account the fact that accompaniment depends so much on the experience of the person doing it, there is no one form of accompaniment, but a diversity of them influenced by the professionals as well as by the entrepreneurs' profiles, their culture, and the local, regional, and national social and economic contexts (Chabaud et al., 2010).

This adds to the fact that focusing solely on entrepreneurs to measure entrepreneurial dynamism neglects the importance of environmental factors, as well as economic development potential (Schmitt et al., 2016). This is why, since Indigenous institutional, social, geographic, and economic context is different from the non-Indigenous context (Fortin-Lefebvre, 2018), it is not surprising that entrepreneurial coaching norms and practices developed "outside" the Indigenous context will tend to convey values and standards that are closer to those of non-Indigenous, in terms of worldview, nature, and relationships with oneself and others (Chabaud et al., 2010). This gap leads practitioners to mobilize tools developed in the literature on non-Indigenous entrepreneurship and to apply them in the Indigenous context, which creates inconsistencies. For example, support measures for Indigenous entrepreneurs tend to promote "economic development" that is closer to that of the non-Indigenous perspective (growth) than to that of Indigenous culture (emancipation, sharing with the community, and harmony between growth and nature) (Peredo & Anderson, 2006; Peredo et al., 2004).

Thus, for the adequation of accompaniment, it is essential to understand better the institutional premises — formal and informal — underlying the context that issues accompaniment norms and standards. This analytical deconstruction process fosters a better

understanding of adaptation needs in terms of entrepreneurial support (Mack & Mayer, 2016). In doing so, support services can be more coherently adapted to the cultural reality of Indigenous businesses.

From Support Services to Entrepreneurial Ecosystems

Studies on entrepreneurship support systems generally agree that consistency and interaction between attributes of an ecosystem positively influence its impact on business development (Spigel, 2015). Furthermore, this impact should focus not only on outcomes, such as the number of businesses being launched, but also at the results on a local, cultural, and social level (Spigel, 2015). In terms of the environment in which entrepreneurship takes place, research mainly describes it as an ecosystem consisting of interacting components which foster regional entrepreneurial activities, including new businesses and organizations (Cloutier et al., 2014; Isenberg, 2010; Mack & Mayer, 2016). Entrepreneurial ecosystems are generally recognized as being composed of six general domains (Cloutier et al., 2014; Isenberg, 2010): enabling policies and leadership (e.g., harmonization of programs, pooling of services, alleviating constraints); availability of appropriate finance (e.g., facilitating access to financial resources, diversifying funding sources); quality of human capital (e.g., education, attraction, and retention of workforce measures, financial incentives); a conducive culture (e.g., community identity, cooperation); a range of institutional and infrastructural supports (e.g., networking, training, management tools); venture-friendly markets (e.g., local products and local business promotion).

Although any society's entrepreneurship ecosystem can be described using the same six domains, each ecosystem is unique, being the result of elements interacting together in situated contexts (Isenberg, 2010). Quebec, as for the rest of Canada, is no exception with regard to socio-economic disadvantages faced by Indigenous populations (Delic, 2009). These include political and structural obstacles, such as underfunding of social services, cultural elements, such as racism, and economic hardships, such as unemployment. Added to this is the accelerated sedentary life of Indigenous peoples, which, over the past 60 years, is believed to be at the root of multiple social and economic changes (Canadian Human Rights Commission, 2013; Coates & Crowley, 2013; Kulchyski, 2013). These factors occupy an essential role in entrepreneurial activities. For example, communities located near major centres are generally more integrated into urban and regional life than remote communities, and this urbanization provides them with opportunities to develop commercial relationships with the rest of society (Secrétariat aux affaires autochtones, 2011). In fact, the economic development of communities would vary according to three main factors: proximity to major centres, road links, and the school enrolment rate (Secrétariat aux affaires autochtones, 2011).

This highlights the importance of contextualizing our view of entrepreneurship ecosystems, especially because an entrepreneurial ecosystem is not a fixed state, but something to be built within an environment in which entrepreneurs can be identified and guided through available resources and accompaniment services (Barès & Chabaud, 2012). In this sense, many authors argue that the elements of an ecosystem, taken separately, cannot guarantee an entrepreneurial dynamism, but that a synergy between them is necessary (Barès & Chabaud, 2012; Isenberg, 2010; Schmitt et al., 2016). Building on the idea of the necessity of synergy, Barès and Chabaud (2012) suggest paying attention to the collaboration and coherence between elements of an ecosystem: diversity of entrepreneurial needs and difficulties; a collaboration between components of an ecosystem; and duration and types of accompaniment

services. Therefore, by taking these elements into our analysis, we aim for a better understanding of Indigenous entrepreneurial specificities, challenges, and the diversity of actors that make up the ecosystem (Philippart, 2016).

METHODS

In this section we present and justify the methodological choices used to conduct our research. We mainly focus on defending our research strategy, presenting the empirical context and its relevance, outline our data collection process, and explain how we analyzed our qualitative data and identified our findings.

Research strategy. The objective of this research was to co-create knowledge (Sharma & Bansal, 2020), in collaboration with the First Nations of Quebec and Labrador Economic Development Commission (FNQLEDC), on entrepreneurial accompaniment services directed towards Indigenous communities in Quebec, Canada. This constructivist approach, combined with the exploratory nature of the research, led us to adopt a qualitative and inductive strategy (Patton, 2002). We believe that this approach is consistent with the need for understanding the underlying issues and mechanisms of the Quebec entrepreneurial accompaniment ecosystem. As is common in collaborative research with practitioners, FNQLEDC contributed to all phases of the research, especially its conception and realization (Dumais, 2011). FNQLEDC is the main actor in terms of support for Indigenous entrepreneurs in Quebec. It represents the interests of more than 90,000 Indigenous peoples. Its role is vital in two regards. First, it acts as a liaison agent for the actors of the Indigenous entrepreneurial ecosystem, while supporting the support service structures offered in all communities. Second, it is in charge of a significant challenge for Quebec: the socio-economic development of First Nations, which is increasingly recognized — by First Nations as well as by public authorities and global institutions — as an essential vector of local capacity development and social progress (Proulx, 2012). Therefore, this research partnership developed with FNQLEDC is particularly relevant — it enabled us to study a ‘revelatory’ case (Yin, 1994), since, to our knowledge, entrepreneurial accompaniment services directed towards Indigenous communities in Quebec have never before been studied.

Data sources. To conduct our study, we relied on several data sources to ensure the trustworthiness of our qualitative research (Lincoln & Guba, 1994). We triangulated sources of information by combining primary and secondary data. Secondary sources were first collected to understand the context and identify the main actors of the ecosystem. Information for the identification of organizations offering entrepreneurial accompaniment services in Quebec was collected, focusing especially on their services, geographic coverage, and admission conditions. Using documentary research on the Internet, we collected newspaper articles, reports, and archives on the topics of indigenous entrepreneurship in Quebec, as well as the accompaniment services. We then completed this data with primary data collected during two focus groups with a total of 21 community economic development officers (hereinafter CEDO). These officers work on entrepreneurial accompaniment and are active within the ten First Nations of Quebec. The objective was to gather information on the nature of coaching practices, the challenges specific to the indigenous context, and the nature of collaboration with other organizations of the ecosystem. Finally, we also consulted the FNQLEDC’s directory of indigenous businesses. This gave us access to important,

relevant information on indigenous businesses in Quebec. In total, 995 businesses' profiles were analyzed. The second round of primary data collection occurred during May–October 2019 using individual interviews with 4 CEDOs and 11 entrepreneurs, representing four different communities. A survey was also conducted which gathered data from 15 CEDOs and 26 indigenous entrepreneurs across Québec. Finally, a third focus group was held with 20 professionals involved in indigenous economic development (CEDOs, representatives of economic development organizations).

Data analysis. To analyze our qualitative data, we followed three steps through an inductive process. First, we identified the specificities of Quebec's Indigenous context and what it meant in terms of accompaniment practice challenges. To do so, we analyzed the profiles of 995 Indigenous entrepreneurs in Québec as listed by the FNQLEDC. Here, we were particularly interested in understanding the dynamics of Indigenous entrepreneurship in Quebec in terms of industries, size of companies, spoken languages, the composition of their workforce, and finally, their geographic positioning in relation to the major urban centres of Quebec. Second, we mapped the critical stakeholders of Quebec's entrepreneurial accompaniment ecosystem. This led us to identify the mission and activities provided by each stakeholder, as explained in the findings section. We also used this to clearly distinguish the stakeholders that offer exclusive services for Indigenous people, from those who accompany both Indigenous and non-Indigenous entrepreneurs. Third, building on this distinction, we qualitatively assessed the synergy between the stakeholders, trying to understand the nature of their interactions and collaborations.

FINDINGS

Our empirical findings are structured in three main sections. The first presents a detailed portrait of the entrepreneurial ecosystem in Quebec. The second section delves into the specific challenges and barriers that Indigenous entrepreneurs from Quebec are facing. The third and last section illuminates the synergy in the Indigenous entrepreneurial ecosystem of Quebec. Overall, these foci allow us to understand the areas of improvement better to make this ecosystem more efficient.

Axis 1: Investigating and Mapping the Profile of Indigenous Entrepreneurs in Quebec

Businesses profile

In analyzing FNQLEDC's Indigenous business repertoire, we came with five insights regarding characteristics that can influence accompaniment needs. The figures below (1 to 5) summarize the details of Quebec's Indigenous businesses. First, 48.1% of Quebec Indigenous entrepreneurs are self-employed, highlighting that Indigenous businesses are mostly small businesses and self-employed income. Another 30.2% of Indigenous businesses employ two to five people. Since small businesses generally need to be multi-functional in their day to day tasks, this could mean a need for general business knowledge and accompaniment services.

FIGURE 1
Size of Indigenous Businesses in Terms of Employees

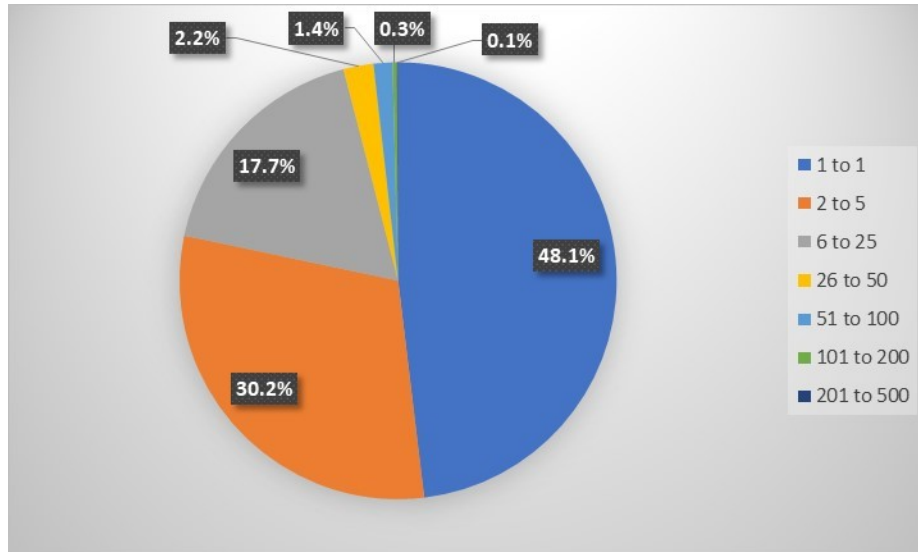


FIGURE 2
Main Languages Spoken and Used Within Indigenous Businesses of Quebec

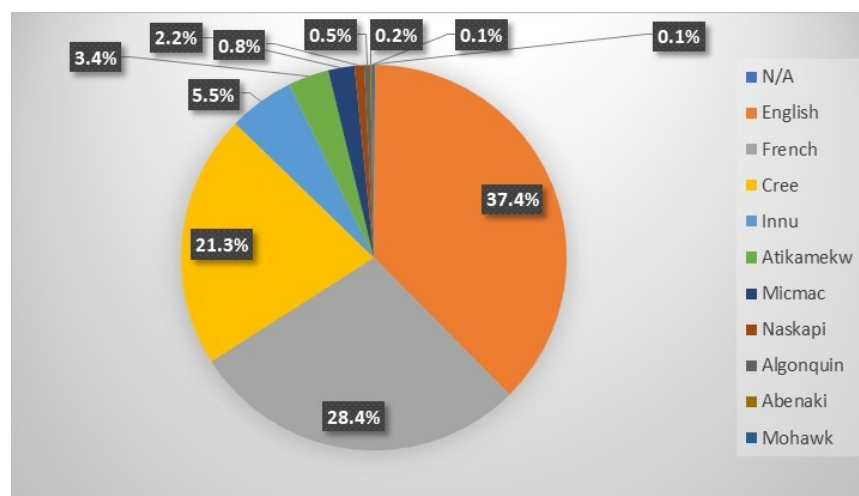


FIGURE 3
Proportion of Natives In the Workforce

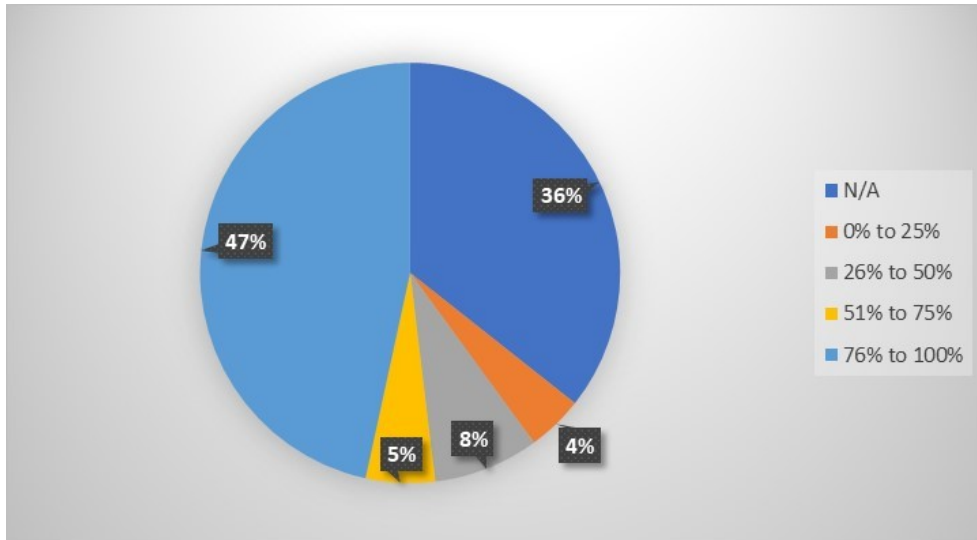
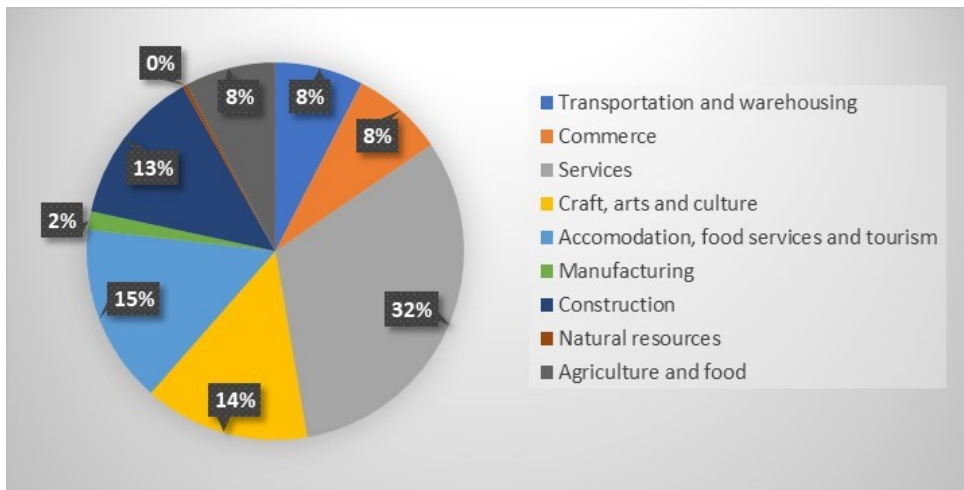
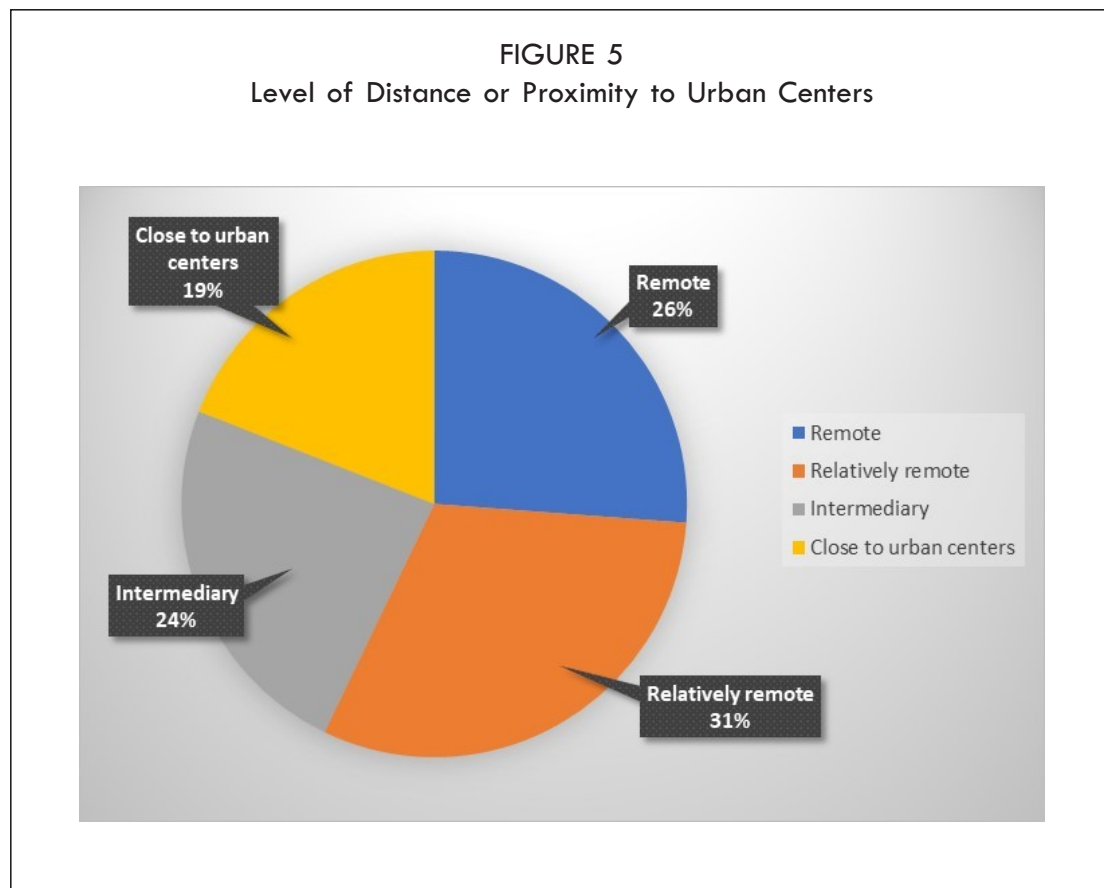


FIGURE 4
Activity Sectors in Which Indigenous Businesses Operate





Second, in terms of main languages spoken within Indigenous businesses, 37.4% of Quebec's businesses rely on English as the primary language, while 28.4% use French. In sum, a total of 65.8% of Indigenous businesses can receive accompaniment services in one of the two languages. The remaining businesses (34.2%) declared their traditional language as the language mainly used. This shows the importance of considering local languages as essential vectors for sharing information with entrepreneurs. Then, regarding administrative bureaucracy, this raises questions about the ability of entrepreneurs to understand and complete official documents in an informed manner.

Third, 52% of businesses have at least 51% of their workforce occupied by Indigenous people. This highlights that culture and ways of doing things are probably omnipresent in Indigenous businesses. In this sense, in their interactions with suppliers and business partners coming from varied cultural horizons, the probability that issues of cultural understanding arise increases. This should be taken into consideration within accompaniment services in terms of cross-cultural training.

Fourth, it is interesting that Indigenous businesses operate in a variety of sectors. Our analysis showed that 32% of Indigenous businesses operate in industries related to finance, educational services, repair and maintenance, professional and technical services, support services, waste management, and healthcare services. Then, 14% of Indigenous businesses

operate in craft, arts, and culture, while 15% operate in accommodation, food services, and tourism, and another 13% in the construction industry. This shows a great variety in terms of activities and therefore, it translates into a need for support services that are diversified and in accordance with the specificities of each industry.

Fifth and last, in terms of geographic localization, we found that 26% of Quebec's Indigenous entrepreneurs are situated in remote regions, 31% in relatively remote regions, 24% in intermediary regions, while 19% are close to urban centres. This typology is based on the following criteria: remote regions are difficult to access by road and are not close to any village or community of 500 inhabitants or more. Relatively remote regions are classified as such by Quebec public authorities:¹ either less than 90 minutes of driving from a village or town with less than 2,500 inhabitants, or more than 90 minutes of driving from a city between 2,500 and 35,000 inhabitants. Intermediary regions are situated less than 30 minutes from cities with more than 2,500 inhabitants or one hour or more from a city of 30,000 inhabitants or more. Lastly, close to urban centres, communities are usually 30 minutes away from driving from a city of more than 20,000 inhabitants. In terms of accompaniment and support services, this means that 57% of Indigenous businesses can face difficulties getting access to suppliers, costumers, potential partnerships, and support services.

The Entrepreneurial Ecosystem

With respect to the analysis of the entrepreneurial ecosystem, our literature review enabled us to classify the services according to their target: exclusively to an Indigenous clientele or to the entire Quebec population. Table 1 summarizes the main services currently available.

Exclusive service for Indigenous people. Regarding services intended exclusively for Indigenous populations, an initial observation reveals the fact that the offer is mainly focused on business financing. Only the FNQLEDC has a mandate focused on entrepreneurial accompaniment without a financing offer. Its mandate is thus to support the work of the CEDOs spread throughout almost all 10 First Nations and to offer support services directly to entrepreneurs. Otherwise, other organizations offer both accompaniment and financing services. This is the case of First Nations of Quebec Investment, which, in addition to its role as a venture capital investor, offers consulting and coaching services to community or private businesses for all First Nations of Quebec. In addition to financing and assistance in drafting the business plan, Native Commercial Credit Corporation (NCCC) offers several First Nations² of Quebec financing in the form of loans, consulting services, support for the development of the business project, and assistance in drafting the financial package and follow-up for the company. For its part, Aboriginal Tourism Quebec offers a financing and project support service in the field of tourism for the 10 First Nations and the Inuit nation. In a more targeted manner for the Cree Nation, the *Eeyou Economic Group* offers loans to entrepreneurs, in addition to support in the drafting of the business plan. Also, for the Cree Nation, the Société de développement de la Baie James (SDBJ) offers business support services in the post-financing phases (growth, repositioning, diversification).

¹ For this specific category, note that the Quebec government labels them as "intermediary communities", a term that we use for another category to clearly distinguish the remoteness of communities.

² Nations Abénakise, Algonquine, Atikamekw Crie (PDEA seulement), Huronne-wendat, Malécite, Micmaque, Alliance Autochtone du Québec.

TABLE 1 Accompaniment Services Offered to Indigenous Entrepreneurs	
Indigenous Exclusivity	Indigenous and Non-Indigenous People
Coaching FNQLEDC: Support for Community and Economic Development Officers (CEDOs) in First Nations communities	Wage subsidies Local employment centers, Local development centers, Youth employment centers, Some Chambers of Commerce.
Coaching and financing First Nations of Quebec Investment (FNQII): venture capital; consulting, coaching. Native Commercial Credit Corporation (NCCC): loans, consulting, start-up support and follow-up. Aboriginal Tourism: financing and support. Eeyou Economic Group: loans and start-up support. Société de développement de la Baie James (SDBJ): loans, investments, support for growth.	Funding and support Canada Economic Development; Société d'aide au développement de la collectivité Côte-Nord; Entrepreneurship Foundation; Regional Centre for Adult Education
Financing Cree Nation Government Department of Commerce and Industry: Start-up and Growth; Corporation for the Economic Development of Montagnais (CDEM): loans. Aboriginal Affairs Secretariat: multiple funding	

In terms of organizations that only offer financing services, we have identified the *Cree Nation Government Department of Commerce and Industry*, which offers financing for business start-ups and growth, as well as a special fund for sustainable businesses and cooperatives. As for the Innu Nation, the Corporation for the Economic Development of Montagnais (CDEM) offers loans to entrepreneurs in the nine communities on the North Shore and Saguenay-Lac St-Jean. On the government side, the Secretariat for Aboriginal Affairs offers financial support in several forms to economic, social, or community projects through the Aboriginal Initiatives Fund III.

Services for Indigenous and non-Indigenous clientele. Certain services intended for the general Quebec population are also accessible to Indigenous entrepreneurs. These include wage subsidies at Emploi Québec, through Local Employment Centres, regional organizations such as Local Development Centres, and Youth Employment Centers, as well as some chambers of commerce. Funding and support services are also provided through Canada Economic Development, the Société d'aide au développement de la collectivité Côte-Nord, the Foundation for Entrepreneurship and its mentoring program. Otherwise, the Regional Centre for Adult Education in several regions offers the opportunity to contribute to workforce training for start-up projects. It should be noted that the ecosystem also includes accounting firms, specialized consultants, and financial companies. These services are also available to Indigenous entrepreneurs.

Axis 2: Unveiling the Barriers to Indigenous Entrepreneurship

To better understand the Indigenous entrepreneurial ecosystem of Quebec, our analysis also focused on the barriers to Indigenous entrepreneurship. We have identified three barriers: technical, human, and financial. Each barrier is explained and illustrated below.

Technical Barriers: When the Context Matters

Our research suggests that Indigenous entrepreneurs of Quebec are facing significant technical barriers that limit their entrepreneurial potential. Those barriers are particularly linked to the context in which they operate and are related to five specific challenges: language, access to information, availability of commercial space, and business management knowledge, as well as geographic isolation.

Language. First, the language challenge seems to be an important one for the Indigenous entrepreneurs we met. Because many of them only speak their native language or are not fluent in another language, relying on one of the two national languages (French and English) for external collaborations was a hindrance. This was particularly the case for vital activities such as writing emails for collaborations, preparing business plans for financial institutions, and obtaining the required permits to operate their businesses.

Access to information. Having the right information is essential for the proper functioning of organizations. Yet, due to their geographic remoteness and poor knowledge of the entrepreneurial ecosystem, Indigenous entrepreneurs face a critical issue related to access to relevant information for their venture. For instance, many Indigenous entrepreneurs emphasized their lack of awareness of the existence of specific governmental procedures and financial opportunities. They also regularly suggest that they do not know the stories of successful Indigenous businesses, which could lead them on the right path to follow.

Availability of commercial space. While it is recognized that access to retail space is vital to businesses, the Indigenous entrepreneurs we have interviewed reveal that the availability of commercial space is a significant issue for them. This is particularly true in small communities, where the legal area (recognized by the federal government) is limited, leading to increased competition between commercial and residential land-use. Moreover, the process through which Indigenous entrepreneurs obtain retail space—through band council approval—is deemed to be complicated, lengthy, and sometimes corrupted. In fact, commercial space is a broad issue because of its political implications. It is the federal government, through its Minister of Aboriginal and Northern Affairs, that has authority over the use of these lands on each of the reserves (the “communities” as defined in the *Indian Act*). Band councils do not have the authority to sell, surrender, or lease reserve land, other than to the federal government (André-Grégoire, 2017). However, most of the land allocated to the communities is used for housing and community infrastructure, such as schools and sports centres. There is virtually no commercial space for rent on the communities and practically no land available for building individual businesses. This situation is a major obstacle for entrepreneurs, since it is often difficult for them to find space to establish their businesses and carry out their activities.

Business management knowledge. Entrepreneurial and managerial competencies are another issue facing Indigenous entrepreneurs. For instance, many of them suggested that they wish they could develop a deeper understanding of accounting, taxation, and other vital activities, such as marketing and human resources management. These are the fundamental skills allowing the proper functioning of organizations. Perhaps a bit more surprising and unsettling, CEDOs themselves are also lacking business management and entrepreneurial knowledge. Yet, they are in the frontline to support entrepreneurs in their ventures. Many CEDOs we interviewed have themselves pointed out that they do not necessarily feel competent in what they do. There is great inconsistency between the tasks that these CEDOs must accomplish and the skill profile of several of them. The consequence is that the CEDOs become mere administrative transmission chains, rather than agents of change.

Geographic isolation. Finally, the geographic isolation of those Indigenous entrepreneurs, living far from urban centres, is a vital barrier insofar as it considerably reduces the market opportunities for businesses. Moreover, it makes any business model quite tricky because of the difficulty of accessing reliable and quality suppliers. Ultimately, when transported to remote communities, raw materials tend to be very expensive due to transportation costs.

Human Barriers: Socio-Cultural Issues at Play

The second category of barriers identified in our analysis is related to socio-cultural issues. These barriers are less numerous than the previous one, but no less critical. They may even be more delicate in the sense that they represent a set of implicit values and beliefs that is difficult to undo and rooted in historical realities. Three specific challenges are identified here: relationships with non-Indigenous peoples, reluctance to engage in non-Indigenous behaviours, and local competition.

Relationships with non-Indigenous peoples. A significant challenge that Indigenous entrepreneurs face is related to their relationships with non-Indigenous peoples, whether they are customers, partners, or suppliers. Overall, the Indigenous entrepreneurs we have interviewed agree that their relationships with non-Indigenous peoples are mostly built on distrust and fear of judgment, thus leading to great hindrances in developing and nurturing sustainable partnerships and networking. Entrepreneurs are continually suspicious of being scammed, so to speak. These concerns are clearly fuelled by the tragic history of the Canadian First Nations, who have long been stigmatized and discriminated against institutionally (Dussault & Erasmus, 1996). It is for this reason that we argue that this fear is a crucial issue — because it is invisible and based on deep-rooted values and beliefs.

According to many Indigenous entrepreneurs, there is still a mistrust stemming from the legacy of residential schools. It is reported that residential schools forced people to abandon their personality traits that are necessary for entrepreneurship (boldness, risk tolerance, ability to speak in public, confidence in the future, etc.). As a result of these conditions, the entrepreneurial spirit is repressed in Indigenous communities and instead left in the hands of the band council, whose responsibility is to see to the economic and social well-being of the community. In the same vein, several participants pointed out that there is still a lack of trust among non-Indigenous towards Indigenous. While partnerships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous businesses are promoted and desired, many business opportunities are not explored because of this mistrust. It should also be noted that such partnerships can

be complicated from a fiscal and regulatory point of view, since laws and rules can be different for businesses on reserve.

Reluctance to engage in behaviour considered non-Indigenous. Another important barrier related to socio-cultural issues is linked to the fact that many Indigenous entrepreneurs experience significant tensions and paradoxes inherent in their entrepreneurial activities. These are associated with a generalized reluctance to engage in certain behaviours considered as ‘non-Indigenous’. Among those, Indigenous entrepreneurs we interviewed constantly ask themselves how to succeed without compromising their Indigenous identity? How to reconcile business with traditional Indigenous values? For example, the notion of profits is negatively perceived, while private enterprise itself is stigmatized and seen as individualistic. The idea of competition among the same members of a given community is seen as contradicting the values of unity, cohesion, and collaboration inherent in Indigenous cultures. Entrepreneurs mentioned an incompatibility between Indigenous collaborative and community values that are inconsistent with the values promoted by the entrepreneurial ecosystem organizations and the criteria of the funding programs: “First Nations are told ‘*Be proud*’, but their access to funding is being forced outright [based on] their values.” Taken together, these tensions relating to ‘appropriate’ behaviour tend to paralyze entrepreneurial action. In other instances, they even tend to distance entrepreneurs from the economic sphere.

Local competition and the role of the local government. A final barrier in this category is related to the opposing views and logic regarding economic development within Indigenous communities. More precisely, the issue of local competition between local governments — as an economic agent for collective value — and private enterprises is critical. Due to the asymmetry of power and resources, many Indigenous entrepreneurs encountered are discouraged by this competition, which is considered unhealthy. The broader question here is, what place can private entrepreneurs occupy in the entrepreneurial ecosystem of communities? Are individual entrepreneurs on an equal footing with businesses managed by local governments, or are they relegated to the background? These questions generate significant doubts among the Indigenous entrepreneurs we interviewed. Moreover, since the support of local governments greatly facilitates the development of an entrepreneurial project, it was also reported to us that this could lead to fears of going into business for entrepreneurs who would not succeed in convincing the local government Council, or who would already be on bad terms with one of its members. Since the Council is called upon to support different projects, there may also be difficult choices between various private entrepreneurship projects, and between collective and individual projects as well. The fear of having one’s idea stolen by the board was also mentioned. As in other circles, favouritism, antipathies, and conflicts of interest can prevail, and project holders are not necessarily on an equal footing when it comes to garnering official support. Local governments can, therefore, have a significant influence on the professional development of an individual and the setting up of a business.

Financial Barriers: Dealing with the Legal-Institutional Burden

Finally, financial barriers, especially those relating to the legal-institutional legacies, are also essential hindrances to Indigenous entrepreneurship in Quebec. Here, two specific challenges are raised: the taxation system and financing.

Taxation system issue. Similarly, the taxation of an Indigenous business differs from that of a non-Indigenous business. First, under the *Indian Act*, the income of Indigenous individuals

and businesses is considered personal property and, therefore, is not taxable. However, for the exemption to apply, the activities must take place in the territory of the community. As soon as these conditions change, the Quebec and Canadian rules apply. The factors then to be considered are the place of residence of the entrepreneur, the type of work performed, the place where the work was performed, and the nature of the benefit derived by Indigenous. Second, Indigenous people are also exempt from paying taxes on goods purchased on a reserve or delivered to a reserve by the vendor. For Indigenous entrepreneurs, this means that they must deal with different rules depending on whether they sell to an Indigenous or non-Indigenous clientele and whether they operate exclusively within communities. Specially trained professionals (e.g., accountants, lawyers) are therefore often needed to overcome this complexity; this can represent additional costs or delays, as these professionals are rare to find.

Financing. Access to funding is undoubtedly a vital element of any entrepreneurial project. However, in the Indigenous context a major obstacle is the impossibility of using one's home as collateral for a loan from a financial institution (Quesnel, 2019). Indeed, under the *Indian Act*, property on the reserve is exempt from seizure, which prevents Indigenous entrepreneurs living on reserve from using this form of security to finance their business projects. While non-Indigenous entrepreneurs commonly use this formula, the obstacle posed by the *Indian Act* to Indigenous entrepreneurs is experienced as a very significant problem in the communities. However, as discussed in the previous section, programs exist to circumvent this problem by explicitly targeting Indigenous entrepreneurs. Also, there are loan guarantees that band councils provide on specific occasions. However, the critical difference between Indigenous and non-Indigenous identified by the *Indian Act* is unanimously viewed by the respondents as a distinction of pejorative treatment.

Axis 3: Analyzing the Ecosystem's Synergy Issues

In this third and final analysis step, we focused on the support services ecosystem, trying better to understand the nature of the synergy between its actors. We mainly focus on the synergy of the support services ecosystem, the collaboration among actors, and across different regional entities, as well as the nature and duration of support services.

Synergy of the support services ecosystem. To obtain an understanding of the existing dynamism of support services for Indigenous entrepreneurs, we directed our attention to three elements. First, we analyzed the perceptions of the support services offered by comparing EDOs and entrepreneurs' perceptions to see how the entrepreneur's needs are met (Verzat & Gaujard, 2009). Second, we investigated the state of collaboration between actors of the ecosystem to get a better understanding of its dynamism (Spigel, 2015). Third, we paid attention to the process and duration of support services (Barès & Chabaud, 2012; Verzat & Gaujard, 2009).

To get a better understanding of the adequation between entrepreneurs' needs and the support services offered, we compared perceptions of entrepreneurs and CEDOs on entrepreneurship in Indigenous context. Table 2 illustrates three elements that particularly caught our attention: financial resources, business knowledge, support services. First, as Table 2 shows, financial resources are considered challenging to acquire for Indigenous entrepreneurs. Because Indigenous people living on communities do not own the land they live on (as dictated by the *Indian Act*), they cannot give their houses as a guarantee to financial institu-

TABLE 2
Comparison of Perceptions of Support Services

	Financial resources	Business knowledge	Support services
According to EDOs	Entrepreneurs lack the necessary capital investment	Entrepreneurs lack business knowledge and need business plans to be drafted for them	Our job is to support entrepreneurship
According to entrepreneurs	Every entrepreneur interviewed in this study used their own capital to start their business	EDOs lack business knowledge and need help from consultants	EDOs spend their time on band council business
Elements of analysis	One of the main difficulties for EDOs is to help entrepreneurs get access to funding, mainly due to lack of down payment money. Access to funding is hard for entrepreneurs who do not already have enough money to launch their business on their own.	Entrepreneurs and EDOs often lack basic business knowledge. Consequently, money is often spent to find outside help to fill this need. Help from consultant is often generic and does not consider cultural differences.	EDOs spend most of their time working for the band of Council and have less time for entrepreneurs. In most communities, there is no long-term economic development strategy that take entrepreneurship into account.
Element of solution	Funding programs should consider that due to the <i>Indian Act</i> , Indigenous entrepreneurs living in communities cannot put their house as a guarantee, as entrepreneurs outside of communities often do.	Educational programs should focus on basic economic and business knowledge for Indigenous entrepreneurs. Those business education programs should be adapted to Indigenous realities.	Two economic development model are in competition inside communities: There is a need for communities to develop long-term economic strategies that take entrepreneurship into account.

tions. Therefore, that explains why entrepreneurs say they started their business with their own money, while CEDOs say Indigenous entrepreneurs generally do not have enough personal money.

Second, business knowledge is lacking in both entrepreneurs and CEDOs. From the entrepreneur's point of view, CEDOs tend to hire consultants because they lack the knowledge to do the work themselves. These consultants are professionals who give assistance to CEDOs on matters relating to economic development, specific fields like forestry or industries, and government tender notices. From the CEDOs point of view, entrepreneurs usually have difficulties in carrying out their business projects. According to CEDOs, entrepreneurs tend to expect CEDOs to write business plans for them, either because they lack writing literacy or basic business knowledge. Consequently, many abandon their project or choose to hire consultants to write for them. In either case, these situations have a negative impact on entrepreneurial and business knowledge of CEDOs and entrepreneurs that are not developed in the process of developing the business opportunity. Entrepreneurs do not learn when the

business plan or other documents are written for them, and EDOs do not learn if they do not have the opportunity to work closely with entrepreneurs.

Third, support services from CEDOs are mostly directed towards the needs of local governments. According to CEDOs, support services to entrepreneurs are part of their job description. Still, they agree that they do so in a lesser way than they do for the community's local government projects. By contrast, most entrepreneurs were not aware CEDOs could offer them services and thought CEDOs worked only for the local government and not for individuals. As we realized during our interviews, there is a general lack of communication between EDOs and entrepreneurs in every community we visited.

Collaboration. At a regional level, new businesses tend to benefit from an environment where there is a continuous collaboration, learning (Malmberg & Maskell, 2002) and channels of communication (Verzat & Gaujard, 2009). This type of social climate, combined with resources such as a shared regional labour pool, local knowledge, and connection with nearby research universities, contributes to a robust entrepreneurial culture (Spigel, 2015). Unfortunately, our results with Indigenous entrepreneurs showed that entrepreneurs and CEDOs perceive these elements to be lacking.

In terms of collaboration, knowledge, and resources at a local level, CEDOs play a major role in terms of advising entrepreneurs and sharing information. Nonetheless, according to CEDOs, there are few channels of communication that permits collaboration between them. They also mention collaborating mostly with outside government agents and consultants to help with market research, business plans, and other tasks. Although CEDOs have access to ongoing training through FNQLEDC, government programs, and regional resources like chambers of commerce (for non-isolated communities), many of them say they feel isolated and believe they would benefit from exchanging best practices among themselves and other economic development actors. Furthermore, both CEDOs and entrepreneurs say CEDOs spend a major part of their time working on local government business and have less time for entrepreneurs. As a result, there are very few collaborations between them to develop knowledge about business opportunities at the local level (Spigel, 2015).

On a more global level, for an ecosystem to be considered dynamic, a diversity of actors and strategies is necessary, as well as structures that link entrepreneurs with the outside environment. According to these criteria, our results show that the Indigenous entrepreneurial ecosystem cannot be qualified as dynamic. Our research identifies only a few channels of communication and collaboration between actors. Rather, we found that the responsibility lies with FNQLEDC to ensure coordination between the local and regional level. FNQLEDC, as the main support organization, offers technical and advisory resources to both CEDOs and First Nation's entrepreneurs directly. It also engages in networking activities — for example, by working in collaboration with First Nations of Quebec Business Network. FNQLEDC appears to have taken the central position in the First Nations entrepreneurial ecosystem, and it tends to channel and centralize efforts to educate and promote an entrepreneurial culture within First Nations. Furthermore, according to CEDOs, most First Nations communities do not have a strategic economic development plan that takes entrepreneurship into account (excluding businesses launched by local governments), thereby reinforcing the centralized role of FNQLEDC.

Ultimately, for an entrepreneurial ecosystem to be considered dynamic, the information should be fluid and decentralized, and new actors, such as mentors, and emerging networks should be freely connecting with entrepreneurs and CEDOs. According to Spigel (2015),

investment capital within local regions should also be available in a way to reinforce and help create more local entrepreneur success stories, thus contributing to normalizing entrepreneurial activities, risk-taking, and innovation, all components of a supportive entrepreneurial culture (Spigel, 2015).

Nature and duration of support services. In terms of services to Indigenous entrepreneurs, our results show that the offer is mainly based on helping to find funding and assistance in writing business plans. Some CEDOs also mentioned they have helped entrepreneurs in the ideation phase and involved in developing market study and obtaining legal and other specific or specialized service providers' documentation, including exportation. No CEDOs mentioned working with entrepreneurs on the growth phase of their business, and none of their services are set to be particularly adapted to cultural specificities, like considering how entrepreneurial activities can contribute positively to the community. This means that support services offered in Indigenous communities are mostly generic, centred on the first stages of business launch, and not culturally adapted.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

As a reminder, the objective of this research was to deepen our understanding of the Indigenous entrepreneurial ecosystem in Quebec, Canada. We offer three specific contributions to the literature on this topic. First, our research offers a portrait of Quebec's Indigenous entrepreneurial ecosystem by highlighting companies' and entrepreneurs' profiles and by describing support services available to Indigenous entrepreneurs. By doing so, our study contributes to an understanding of the specificities of Indigenous entrepreneurship activities and how support services could address them. Second, this study contributes to research on Indigenous entrepreneurship by unveiling specific technical, human, and financial barriers that hinder entrepreneurship. Third, our research also provides insights into the entrepreneurial ecosystem by comparing entrepreneurs' needs and support services, revealing a lack of synergy due to few channels of communication and collaboration between actors of the ecosystem. Also, it reveals that support services are almost solely focused on financial needs. Furthermore, our findings show that the accompaniment is shared between local governments and individual entrepreneurs, creating a situation of competition between these two forms of entrepreneurship. All in all, our research framed the issue of entrepreneurial accompaniment and support services with the idea of understanding adaptation needs to the Indigenous context.

Implications of Indigenous Entrepreneurs' Reality for Accompaniment Services

By revealing the specificities of the Quebec Indigenous context, our study highlights five implications for support services.

First, this research emphasizes the fact that 78% of businesses have five or fewer employees. This can have an impact on what is needed in terms of support services. For example, entrepreneurs with very few employees might not have on hand help for book-keeping, marketing, training, or other management tasks. Therefore, we think there might be a need for support services on those matters.

Second, our results show that 34.2% of companies operate in a language that is neither French nor English. What this situation shows us is the possibility that those companies might be less at ease to interact with government bodies, write or read official documents, collaborate with non-Indigenous companies, and nurture partnerships outside of their nation. Support services should take these needs into account.

Third, our data reveals that 52% of companies mostly employ Indigenous people. This can have consequences for the need for cultural adaptation when dealing with non-Indigenous customers, other businesses, or government officials. Accompaniment could, therefore, include the cultural dimension of how to do business with other cultures. In international business, for instance, cross-cultural training is frequent and is useful in doing business in different cultures. Similar training could be done in Quebec, bridging various practices and perspectives through cultural training.

Fourth, our findings show that the Indigenous economy is mainly composed of businesses in the service industry. Together, they make up 61% of all businesses. This includes businesses in craft, arts, and culture, as well as in accommodation, food services, and tourism. What this tells us is that these businesses operate mostly locally, and their clientele is a mix of Indigenous and non-Indigenous people. This could imply the need for specific training, like customer service courses and online marketing. Interestingly, these sectors are mostly culturally driven, and therefore, we argue that support services should be able to address the puzzle of promoting traditional culture without compromising it. More importantly, support services should consider the diversity of industries and businesses and the different issues and challenges it implies.

Fifth, our research highlights the remoteness of Indigenous entrepreneurship. As shown in our results, 57% of companies are situated in geographic areas qualified as remote or relatively remote, indicating that accessibility to supplies, customers, and services can be difficult.

Therefore, not only support services should address these specific challenges, but should also adapt its own availability with online services when possible, local training from professionals and teachers who would travel from one community to another, as well as partnerships between local schools and universities for the development of joint training.

A Facilitating Posture of Entrepreneurial Accompaniment

Our research suggests that the Indigenous context presents several challenges that are specific to it — for example, the impossibility of securing housing, the scarcity of commercial space, and the influence of non-Indigenous businesses as partners and clients. While our research paid attention to the specific needs of entrepreneurs, it also reveals that support services seem to respond only to a lesser extent to these needs, for they generally imitate the standards of the rest of Quebec society. The service offer is mainly based on financing and assistance in writing the business plan. The support is mostly technical and not focused on prior business knowledge. Furthermore, except for the accompaniment services offered by CEDOs in each community and of FNQLEDC at the provincial level, the proposed assistance consists mostly of venture capital-type financing. This situation seems particularly problematic, as it limits access to services for entrepreneurs with little basic business literacy, which is a characteristic of many Indigenous people living in communities.

Regarding the synergy of the entrepreneurial ecosystem, our research reveals that the main channel of collaboration between organizations and elements of the ecosystem is provided by CEDOs, whose job is to refer entrepreneurs to the appropriate resources. To our knowledge, apart from the work of the FNQLEDC and CEDOs, there is no global strategy to link Indigenous specific challenges, support services, entrepreneurial activities, and overall economic development. In doing so, relying mainly on the work of CEDOs and FNQLEDC without further collaboration between the other actors, the ecosystem remains fragmented and static (Moroz & Hindle, 2012). As a result, economic development is guided by so-called “traditional strategies” (Mack & Mayer, 2016), centred on a market and competitive logic (Schmitt et al., 2016).

Overall, these results suggest that rethinking Indigenous support services and the overall entrepreneurial ecosystem could benefit from an integrative strategy that would consider the specificities of the environment and aim at creating a sense of meaning for Indigenous entrepreneurial activities. As Schmitt et al. (2016) explain it, in doing so, the role of accompaniment would be to co-construct with other actors of the ecosystem. In what they call the “facilitating posture”, the authors suggest that instead of focusing solely on the entrepreneurs and their business plans, an integrative accompaniment strategy would consider the business opportunity, meaning the integration of the business idea into its environment. For example, accompaniment methods would aim at helping entrepreneurs be aware of their implicit knowledge (who they are, what they know, their strengths and weaknesses), and how to express it and value it (Chabaud et al., 2010; Schmitt et al., 2016). Doing so would “not lead to technical answers, but rather to answers in relation to the entrepreneur’s own background, desires, ambitions, understanding of the environment, etc.” (p. 9).

In short, within the Indigenous context, we believe a facilitating posture could help to reinforce the entrepreneurial ecosystem and support services that situate the entrepreneur (knowledge, background), and the business opportunity (how to gather resources, access the market, make partnerships), with the environment (what are the challenges, what are the facilitating elements of the ecosystem). From such a systemic perspective, it is not only each component of the entrepreneurial situation that needs to be worked on, but above all, the interaction between these different dimensions. As Schmitt et al. (2016) put it, a facilitating posture means considering actors of an ecosystem more as partners (partnership logic) than as potential competitors (competitive logic) in the traditional vision. In this sense, our results pave the way for a broader discussion relating to how local governments, economic development organizations, funding agencies, and business support services organizations can work together for a comprehensive economic development strategy within Indigenous contexts. Such a nation-wide strategy could be the first step in this sense.

Concluding Remarks

All in all, our research sought to analyze the current support services ecosystem targeting Indigenous entrepreneurship, which has been little researched in Quebec, and never, to the best of our knowledge, within Indigenous contexts. This is important insofar as several studies show the uniqueness of Indigenous businesses as hybrid forms that differ from more traditional entrepreneurship — by having more collective, social, and ecological objectives at the core of their mission (Dana & Anderson, 2007; Peredo & Anderson, 2006). What we have found is that entrepreneurial accompaniment in the Indigenous context presents a strong need for flexibility with respect to the challenges of the context and the uniqueness of

Indigenous cultures, businesses, and entrepreneurs. Through this research, we hope to have achieved a deeper understanding of the realities and needs of Indigenous entrepreneurs in Quebec in terms of accompaniment services.

Ultimately, our research raises several unanswered questions that we believe are fundamental. First, we need to develop our understanding of how economic development and entrepreneurial support can contribute to meeting the basic needs of Indigenous populations, such as food security and health. Second, another exciting avenue would be to quantitatively document Indigenous entrepreneurial dynamics and realities by assessing how individual, community, and organizational dynamics differ across institutional and geographic contexts. Third and last, another avenue could adopt an ethnographic approach to “live” the Indigenous entrepreneurial experience as its members live it and, in so doing, plunge into the Indigenous imagination through an entrepreneurial adventure. This experience would thus make it possible to better grasp the social, political, and symbolic realities relating to Indigenous entrepreneurship, and therefore the need to adopt policies and support structures in these contexts.

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