Envisioning Community Economic Development Through an Indigenous-Led Social Enterprise in Ka'a'gee Tu First Nation, Northwest Territories

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ABSTRACT

The Ka'a'gee Tu First Nation, in Kakisa, Northwest Territories, is cultivating food to strengthen their food systems against multifaceted threats posed by colonization, climate change, and socioeconomic disparities. Community efforts to grow food are new and stand as an adaptation response to their changing food system. Although establishing food-growing initiatives has been a gradual process, their success is now evident with substantial quantities of food being produced. This research addresses the need for a sustainable food distribution model in Kakisa to ensure food is accessible to the community. Using a participatory action research approach, community members shared their vision, leading to the exploration of an Indigenous-led economic model merging Western approaches with Indigenous values. Kakisa's enterprise will support food distribution systems, including a store, and act as a space to host social gatherings,

facilitate Traditional Knowledge workshops, and share food. The community's vision of an Indigenous-led social enterprise embodies a holistic approach to economic development that emphasizes social bonding and community well-being over pure economic activities. Accomplishing this vision requires continuous efforts toward fostering collaboration, nurturing cultural resurgence, and empowering Indigenous leadership within economic development.

KEYWORDS: Climate change; Aboriginal economic development; food sovereignty, food security, traditional knowledge, Two-Eyed seeing; First Nations social enterprise

POSITIONALITY STATEMENT

The partnership between Wilfrid Laurier University and Ka'a'gee Tu First Nation (KTFN) began in 2013, fostering a collaboration built on trust that continues to this day, with a focus beyond research alone. We—Laura, Charlotte, Jennifer, and Andrew—are settlers working within KTFN territory. Dr. Andrew Spring has overseen this partnership since its inception, with others (including ourselves) joining the collaboration at different points over the years, living in the community for extended periods, building relationships, and working alongside the community to help achieve their vision of self-sufficiency.

Ruby and Maverick are community members of KTFN, living in the settlement of Kakisa. Their perspectives and contributions are rooted in the rich cultural and historical context of the Dene community, which shapes our collaborative efforts.

INTRODUCTION

Situated on the east side of Kakisa Lake (called K'agee Tue in the local language, Dene Zhatie) in the Dehcho region of the Northwest Territories (NWT), the community of Kakisa is home to the Ka'a'gee Tu First Nation (KTFN). The Dene People of Kakisa have lived in this region since time immemorial, with many continuing to practice land-based activities as part of their livelihoods. However, with the rapid onset of climate change, community members are finding it increasingly difficult to access traditional foods from the land (Spring et al., 2018). Since 2013, KTFN has been collaborating with university researchers on projects to support climate change adaptation and food system sustainability. KTFN's Local Food Action Plan (2025-2030) aims to increase the community's self-sufficiency and food security and to advance holistic community well-being (KTFN & Temmer, 2024). As part of this planning process, community members have discussed the best ways to support community well-being in ways that incorporate both Western notions of economic development and Dene values centered

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on sharing, reciprocity, and the health and sacredness of the land and all beings. This visioning process fits well with the Mi'kmaq concept of *Etuaptmumk,* or Two-Eyed Seeing, as it articulates KTFN's existing strengths of working across multiple ways of knowing, being, and doing that align with community values (Young, 2021). In this case study, we share KTFN's vision for the form and function of a revitalized enterprise that can bridge economic development needs and aspirations to secure members' access to food while respecting and protecting their Dene values and knowledge. This work is an ongoing collaboration between researchers and the community to achieve the community's vision of self-sufficiency during a time of rapid environmental change.

Participatory Action Research and Two-Eyed Seeing

Kakisa, in many ways, serves as a model community to highlight climate change adaptation and sustainability projects. By building strong connections with researchers, the community has been able to collaborate with students and regional organizations to test new ideas. Participatory Action Research (PAR) serves as the basis for this work. The results of KTFN's collaborations can be seen in the community, from composting and recycling programs to youth culture camps to greenhouses. These projects are a source of pride to all those involved. PAR is well suited to Indigenous communities due to its emphasis on power-sharing: researchers and community members work closely together to determine research needs and co-develop research methods. Two-Eyed Seeing offers a framework for decolonizing PAR by ensuring it incorporates Indigenous research paradigms and by requiring researchers to incorporate other ways of knowing into their perspectives (Peltier, 2018). KTFN community members are co-researchers and partners in ways that challenge who the expert is, what counts as knowledge, and whom research serves (Fine & Torre, 2019). Through such collaborative research projects, community members ideally gain greater capacity and voice in decision-making and play a key role in activities leading to individual, social, and policy change to meet community needs (Eliassen, 2016). This engagement also encourages non-Indigenous researchers to deconstruct their own institutional and cultural assumptions and knowledge, allowing them to better contribute to social justice through their research (Ray, 2021). In these ways, a Two-Eyed Seeing approach to research is grounded in respect for different ways of knowing and the assumption of responsibility to act on these ways of knowing, as Elder Albert Marshall has been teaching (Bartlett et al., 2012).

PAR requires deep engagement, relationship-building, and a common vision to succeed (Adams et al., 2014), and our research is part of a broader, decade-long PAR initiative. In 2013, KTFN sought support to address climate-related changes that were impacting the community's traditional ways of life, culture, and well-being (Spring et al., 2018). Community members and researchers have collaborated for over 10 years, designing and implementing action projects and forging relationships that build trust and extend beyond the boundaries of research. Researchers engage with the community as they volunteer for events, support action projects, participate in cultural camps, go out on the land with community members, and share food. These experiences allow researchers to develop connections with residents and see them beyond their research

roles, establishing trust and a long-lasting commitment to collaborating with the community.

As part of this relationship building, the community sought assistance in exploring how local enterprises can contribute to the community's well-being, support health initiatives, and create economic opportunities for its residents. PAR has helped to initiate and facilitate this collaborative work.

Conversations around economic development, included establishing a store dedicated to the distribution and sale of produce from Kakisa's community garden and local handicrafts to visitors and neighbouring communities.

Kakisa's Vision of a Future Enterprise

As the community of Kakisa continues to adapt to the impacts of climate change and pursue projects that build resilience and self-sufficiency, their ongoing PAR projects can play an important role in community and economic development. While the community's economic development organization, Noda Enterprises (Noda), has not been operational for some time, it has been identified as an important piece of infrastructure to further food programming in Kakisa. Through ongoing conversations, workshops, and interviews, KTFN members provided their vision of what a new and improved Noda could look like. In keeping with community priorities, ideas and visions are organized into two categories: Sustainable Livelihoods and Food Sovereignty (KTFN, 2014, KTFN & Temmer, 2024). Importantly, relationship building and social connectivity are foundational to these two themes.

Sustainable Livelihoods

Sustainable Livelihoods includes all the activities that enable people to acquire the resources they need to live a good and meaningful life, to weather life's difficulties, and to ensure resources are available for future generations' livelihoods (Chambers & Conway, 1992). Kakisa's many community members participate in both economic (e.g., trades, local government, healthcare services) and subsistence-traditional activities (e.g., crafting, hunting, fishing, gathering, and sharing traditional foods), often referred to as a mixed economy (Natcher et al., 2014). By balancing livelihood options between these two worlds, households can generate income to purchase the goods and supplies needed to participate in traditional food harvesting activities that provide sustenance for the community and are culturally affirming. However, this balance can be difficult to attain, as there are limited employment options. Meanwhile, climate change and increased equipment and fuel costs have made harvesting less safe and more expensive.

Noda could support community members' efforts to more fully engage in the mixed economy by bringing in flexible employment and personal business opportunities: it could function as a hub from which to offer additional services and diversify income sources. For example, the Lady Evelyn Falls Territorial Park, located 10 km from Kakisa, attracts campers, some of whom come to Kakisa Lake to fish. Noda could provide tourism services such as guided hiking and ATV tours through KTFN trails and canoeing and fishing trips on Kakisa and Tathlina Lakes. These services would

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generate income for Noda and allow community guides to monitor changes to the land while earning income. Dene guides could talk about their connection to the land and water while advocating and informing tourists about how climate change is impacting traditional ways of life. While most tourism would be offered during the summer season, winter tourism could include guided ice-fishing, skidoo trail rides, and hikes. Community members suggested hosting an ice-fishing derby to build inter-community solidarity and celebrate Dene culture by being on the land together, a highly valued Dene principle. Such services and events could also create short-term employment opportunities for community members as guides and event organizers.

A communal space providing opportunities for local artists to sell handicrafts, teach Traditional Knowledge and skills, and socialize was also discussed. The community has many talented artists with traditional crafting skills such as beading, sewing, drawing, moose hair tufting, and moccasin making. Selling traditional crafts and teaching how to make them promotes Indigenous arts and allows community members to earn a living while practicing traditional livelihoods. Likewise, empowering and involving women and youth is important for overall community well-being, and reviving traditional skills is linked to female self-sufficiency, allowing women to reclaim these skills and incorporate them into a sustainable livelihood by creating businesses to sell their traditional crafts—an enterprise that requires both Traditional and Western skillsets. Community members emphasized that empowering and involving women and youth is important for overall community well-being. Here we acknowledge a long tradition of Two-Eyed Seeing through Indigenous-owned art commerce, where Northern cooperatives have served as economic drivers as well as tools for strengthening governance and Indigenous resurgence (MacPherson, 2009).

Finally, Noda could provide office space and hotel accommodations for tourists, community researchers, government officials, and medical staff. Doing so would provide flexible employment opportunities (such as hotel and office management and maintenance) to supplement household livelihoods. Profits would be reinvested into community programs and services and support new initiatives that enhance residents' quality of life.

Food Sovereignty

KTFN residents, as part of the ongoing collaboration with researchers, have been cultivating food through vegetable gardens and greenhouses as part of the broader effort to adapt to climate change impacts on community health and well-being (Spring et al., 2018). The consensus is that foods harvested and grown in Kakisa are to be primarily shared among residents to improve access to healthy food and thus support greater food sovereignty. Sharing, particularly of traditional food, is an important Dene value passed across generations (Price et al., 2022), and a redesigned community enterprise could function as a communal space for food preparation and distribution, and whose food storage, refrigerators, and freezers could offer an alternative to organizing and distributing food baskets to individual houses. This space could include a kitchen area so garden produce and traditional foods can be preserved and used in meals for

community members. It could also serve as a space to teach cooking and preservation skills, to share meals, and to cater community events.

At the same time, community members are open to selling surplus vegetables and some prepared foods outside the community. As Kakisa's gardens and greenhouses expand, more food will be produced than can be consumed by households. One community member suggested canning surplus vegetables to reduce waste, prolong food availability beyond the growing season, and provide an alternative way to market food to potential customers. The enterprise could support training for food preserving skills such as canning as ways to both uphold Dene values of not-wasting and sharing, to support community goals of self-sufficiency, and to increase families' ability to choose where their food comes from and how it is produced and distributed to others. A community enterprise could then sell surplus food from the community garden, prepared food, and other staples to tourists from the nearby campground and neighbouring communities to generate revenue and to cover some of the garden program's costs. In this way, the enterprise can act as a mechanism to support traditional food-sharing practices and economic development.

In addition to selling garden foods, the revived store could process and sell fish. One community member noted how tourists and people from surrounding communities often come to Kakisa looking for fish and suggested that KTFN's commercial fishers could sell frozen, vacuum-pack fresh fillets as well as dry fish, a delicacy for which Kakisa is well-known regionally. There is an underutilized fish processing building in Kakisa that could be used, and a store would support in-community sales while fishers sell and deliver their product regionally.

However, while KTFN is making strides toward self-sufficiency, some foods cannot be produced within the community itself. Considering this, community members' hopes for the enterprise include a small-scale and informal store providing staple foods and household goods to community members and visitors. Since food and household items not harvested from the land must be purchased outside the community, often at inflated prices, stocking basic items and staple foods could save both time and money by reducing trips to the nearest store. A small, local store can also provide community members with the ability to reinvest in their own economy as profits from food sales are redistributed through jobs and investment in local services.

Insights from Building a Community Enterprise (Lessons Learned)

Kakisa's vision for a community enterprise expresses the Two-Eyed Seeing of financial viability guided by Dene principles: everyone should participate in decision-making, individual rights are contingent on collective wellbeing, and stewardship responsibilities are part of existing in equality with the land and all living beings (DFN, 2024). This vision prioritizes community well-being through access to space for socializing and preventing loneliness—an aspect often overlooked in Western enterprises (Weissbourd et al., 2021). Furthermore, the community's vision runs counter to capitalist notions of continual growth, which can harm people and the environment for monetary gains. KTFN's conception of wealth is held in common with many other Indigenous

communities: they believe that community economic development should enrich the lives of future generations (Nelson et al., 2019) and that true profits come from being on the land, maintaining cultural traditions, and nurturing relationships (Hilton, 2022). Furthermore, KTFN believes, as do many Indigenous Peoples, that economic, social, and environmental development are interconnected to and dependent on the ability to pass on Traditional Knowledge and cultural identity (Padilla-Melendez et al., 2022).

KTFN and partners realize that this vision is something to work towards over several years and that progress may be slow at times. This good work is rooted in the relationships built with people and the land: building support and capacity over time is key to making this enterprise a success. Understanding the value of meaningful interactions, fostering genuine relationships, respecting traditional practices, and honouring cultural and environmental stewardship enriches our understanding of community needs and aspirations. This holistic approach to economic development asserts that sustainable success is achieved not just through financial gains but through connecting commercial activities to a broad range of community priorities, institutions, and values.

Challenges remain in meeting the goals KTFN members expressed for a revived community enterprise. These include the small population and the community's relative isolation in relation to larger markets for selling foods and other services. There remains a perennial challenge of retaining skilled workers, who are often drawn to employment outside of the community or who take on other essential administrative, programming, and governance roles. And, while the community-research partnership provides researchers and summer students to assist with work during the summer field season as well as some administrative and funding support, the longer-term vision for self-sufficiency requires a combination of youth engagement, training, stable funding sources, and governance to ensure the balance of commercial and social priorities. We also recognize potential shortcomings—and even harms—of attempting to weave between the worlds of Western business and Indigenous values, given the historical reality of how colonial mindsets and political-economic structures have negatively impacted Indigenous Peoples' well-being and sovereignty (Young, 2021). Because of this, we have focused on anti-capitalist economic models developed in non-Indigenous contexts, positioning them as the strength of Western ways of knowing. Nevertheless, the potential for Eurocentrism within alternative movements for economic and social justice convinces us that Two-Eyed Seeing provides a necessary framework for these movements to better see and understand their blind spots, exclusions, and weaknesses in a plural world (Hossein & Pearson, 2023; Kepkiewicz & Dale, 2019).

Conclusion

This article presents a case study of a participatory process to create a vision for revitalizing an enterprise in a small Indigenous community in the NWT. Community members envisioned a social enterprise that draws on Dene's wisdom and cultural practices alongside ethical Western practices and values, helping to achieve the community's broad goals of food sovereignty, economic development, and political

self-determination. This enterprise would provide space for social bonding by providing a place to meet for coffee, organize workshops and knowledge-sharing events, and share food. Employment opportunities in managing the enterprise and providing services (such as excursions for tourists and selling food, crafts, and gas) would also be created. Ultimately, we hope that sharing the community's visioning process and aspirations might inspire other Indigenous communities and entrepreneurs to seek solutions that meet their specific needs and values, while furthering a holistic and community-driven approach to economic development that minimizes ecological and human harms.

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