

Book Review

Northern Aboriginal Communities: Economies and Development

by Peter Douglas Elias

(North York: Captus University Publications)

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Robert M. Bone

Aboriginal communities across Canada face a series of challenges. One challenge is high levels of unemployment while another is financial dependency on government. In northern Canada, these challenges are somewhat muted because northerners still engaged in harvesting food from the land. Known as country food, harvesting, processing and sharing of country food remains an essential pillar in the cultural and economic world of Indian, Inuit and Metis peoples living in northern Aboriginal communities. Yet even with this advantage, northern communities are confronted with many of the same problems and choices found in Aboriginal communities in southern Canada.

Between the covers of this book, the editor, Peter Elias, and his colleagues have addressed the broad but complex nature of economic development and its possible implication for northern Aboriginal communities by presenting a series of articles dealing with a variety of reactions to “development questions” faced by leaders of local communities and Aboriginal organizations. The basic theme running through this book is how do Aboriginal leaders help their communities to retain their Aboriginal identity and

still benefit materially from being a member of the larger Canadian society. The essential question facing Aboriginal peoples is how can they generate sufficient cash income to support a village life-style similar to that enjoyed by non-Aboriginal peoples? Since their domestic economy based on hunting and trapping cannot generate such cash income, Aboriginal peoples and their leaders are searching for alternative forms of economic development. One alternative is to become more involved in the market economy. However, by increasing their involvement in the market economy as either individual wage earners or as Aboriginal-controlled businesses, the implications for their land base economy is often uncertain. As pointed out in the articles found in this book, Aboriginal leaders are often faced with conflicting issues whereby business opportunities threaten to diminish the land based economy either through damage to wildlife habitat or by weakening the collective nature of Aboriginal society through the creation of economic classes, thereby diluting “share ethic” basic to the domestic economy.

In this book, Northern Aboriginal Communities, Professor Elias has cobbled together a

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fine set of articles to illustrate three objectives. These objectives are: (1) to illustrate the importance of economic change in supporting and sustaining political and cultural development; (2) to illustrate the significance of economic development in a particular cultural and historic context—the North; and (3) to illustrate strategies and tactics used by northern communities, organizations, and individuals to achieve economic development.

The book is divided into five parts. In the first part, Elias describes the nature of northern communities, the next three parts of this book deal with case studies while the final section consists of an annotated bibliography.

Elias maintains that northern Aboriginal communities have a number of common characteristics. He defines these villages as having a small number of people but those people are almost all of Aboriginal origin. Most are young and the communities typically have very modest physical infrastructures. They are geographically isolated from other places, and possess a “mixed economy” where incomes are derived from a mix of domestic production based on hunting, fishing and trapping, wage labour, government transfer payments, and a variety of informal enterprises. He stresses the point that collective knowledge (such as represented by this book) could and should be used to inform both northern leaders and their members of the likely consequences of their development initiatives. In doing so, he sets the stage for the remaining articles. In these articles, the reoccurring themes are the conflict between resource development and wildlife habitat or the conflict between economic efficiency versus job creation. For Aboriginal leaders, entering the market economy demands solutions that lead to profitability not bankruptcy. Yet while such solutions increases the total collective wealth of the community and create a few executive positions, they neither resolved the massive unemployment problem nor the pressing need of families for a larger cash income.

The case studies deal with a variety of topics, ranging from issues of co-management of the environment by the Inuvialuit achieved through

the Final Agreement to forest development by the Nipissing Indian Band to public housing at Old Crow. In the case of the Inuvialuit Final Agreement, the Inuvialuit gained considerable control over the environmental impact assessment process through a co-management structure. This marks a important shift of power from Ottawa to the Inuvialuit. On the other hand, the case study of public housing at Old Crow reflect the economic dependency of northern Aboriginal communities. At Old Crow as in almost all northern Aboriginal communities, there is a housing crisis—too few houses for the size of the community and no means of either building or maintaining modern housing by local residents. As Jansen points out, the housing program still reflects the dominant society’s organization and values, forcing communities to try to fit the housing program into their cultural world. The net result is that a housing shortage remains, local residents are still unable to pay rent or maintain their houses, and officials in Whitehorse and Ottawa remain frustrated and puzzled by their inability to resolve matters.

The authors of these articles are Claudia Notzke, Ignatius La Rusic, Katherine Chiste, Gabriele Ferrazzi, David Murray, Charlyle Jansen and Wanda Wuttunee. All these case studies provide valuable insights but all are somewhat dated, that is they deal with the period prior to 1990. Given that the book was published in 1995 and that Professor Elias is describing contemporary issues in his lead chapter, readers would have benefit from a postscript for each case study. Such a postscript could have indicated how matters have change (or not changed) in the early 1990s.

In spite of this one weakness, Northern Aboriginal Communities deserves the attention of the serious scholar, students of northern Canada and the decision-makers living in northern Aboriginal communities and far away capital cities. While this book does not provide solutions, it does alert the reader to the possible impacts of economic development projects on local communities and their residents. As such, Professor Elias and his companions deserve full marks.