Journal of

ABORIGINAL ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

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VOLUME 15 ISSUE 2

Journal of Aboriginal Economic Development

VOLUME 15, NUMBER 2

The Journal of Aboriginal Economic Development
Volume 15, Number 2 (Fall 2025)

Published by the Council for the Advancement of Native Development Officers (Cando)

Open Journal System Hosted by University of Alberta Library Publishing

Journal of Aboriginal Economic Development (Print ed.) ISSN 1481 – 9112
Journal of Aboriginal Economic Development (Online ed.) ISSN 1481 – 9120

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The Journal of Aboriginal Economic Development is Canadian, multi-disciplinary, peer-reviewed and open access. It is the first journal devoted exclusively to issues and practices in the field of economic development and Indigenous peoples and their communities. The Journal, published by Cando (Council for the Advancement of Native Development Officers), offers articles that are of interest to those who teach, study, create policy and those who work in the field.

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The Artwork

The logo is a vibrant, symbolic, and modern design that blends Indigenous-inspired artistry with themes of prosperity, resilience, and community. At the center is a Mi'kmaq star designed like stainless glass to represent the strength and beauty of our land. The top of the logo is a stylized plant/tree sprout emerging upward, symbolizing growth, renewal, and resilience. Its design has a symmetrical, traditional aesthetic that I aim for in my style of art. The sprout sits inside a triangular section with light green tones, drawing attention to the concept of new beginnings and sustainable growth. Behind the central sprout is a sunrise or sunset with warm pink and orange hues spreading across the horizon. This represents hope, vision, and a bright future. The lower panels showcase blue mountains, rivers, and skies, grounding the design in natural landscapes that are key to Indigenous communities and prosperity. Within the lower section is Québec City as the conference location. Its color palette is rich and contrasting, with purples, blues, greens, and warm pinks/oranges. The use of bold black outlines creates a stained-glass or mosaic effect, emphasizing unity through diversity.

The Artist

Natasha Root

Gwe', teluisi Natasha Root. I am a Two-spirited Mi'gmaw woman from Listuguj First Nation, which is in the traditional district of *Gespeg*, in the unceded territory of the Mi'gmaq, known as *Mi'gma'gi*. I am a Mixed Media Artist who specializes in painting & digital designs.

I am a self-taught artist who has been been creating art ever since I can remember. At the age of thirteen, I moved to *Kjipuktuk* (Halifax). The city influenced my first artistic style; graffiti. Then, my style evolved to reflect Indigenous life in modern-day urban society. I returned to Listuguj three years ago. Being back home led me to explore my Mi'gmaw heritage more through my art, leading me to have more Mi'gmaw and Indigenous focused styles that strive to honour the Peoples' of traditional unceded territories across Turtle Island.

Some of the highlights of my artistic career include being showcased at the Jordan Bennett, and being able to work with renowned artists like Loretta Gould. I work primarily as a freelance artist and continue to expand my talent across Turtle Island.

Introduction

Bettina Schneider

This issue's Lessons from Experience highlight the work of the 2024 Cando winners. The first article focuses on Cando's Economic Developer of the Year Award Winner in the Community Category, Bearspaw First Nation, and its many profitable businesses and initiatives in Alberta, led by Rob Shotclose, the CEO of the Bearspaw First Nation since 2011. The second article explores the exciting economic development work accomplished by Lisa Grant, Cando's 2024 Economic Developer of the Year, through her work for the Haisla First Nation in British Columbia. The third article shares the journey of Natasha Peters, and her major achievements and sources of inspiration as the owner and creator of Kaska Dena Designs, Cando's 2024 Indigenous Private Sector Business Award winner.

The three articles in Lessons from Experience showcase the important work being done by one Nation in Saskatchewan and two First Nation economic development corporations in British Columbia. In *Looking After Everyone Right: The Fishing Lake First Nation Approach to Treaty Settlements*, Tasha Brooks and Bob Kayseas share how Fishing Lake First Nation set up the *Waywaynih Kunawapunteeing* Trust to invest their $101.3 million "Cows and Plows" settlement instead of choosing one-time payouts, and the long-term benefits of this decision. In *Economic Self-Determination in Action: Sii T'ax Development Corporation's Achievements*, Bert Mercer and Mia Brown share how the Sii T'ax Development Corporation (STDC) became an independent economic development corporation of the Gitlaxt'aamiks Village Government after the Nisga'a Final Agreement required Nisga'a's four villages to manage business and economic development through independent economic development corporations. Mercer and Brown provide an overview of STDC's transition to

independence, all that it has achieved since independence, and what other Nations can learn from STDC's experience. In *Seeds of Self-Determination: How Snuneymuxw Built Economic Power*, Greg Moynan and Tasha Brooks examine the Petroglyph Development Group's evolution as an economic development corporation of the Snuneymuxw First Nation (SFN). They share their early beginnings, supporting community-based ventures, as well as their larger undertakings, such as the acquisition of Casino Nanaimo and Elements Casino Victoria, and PDG's building blocks of success.

2024 CANDO Economic Developer of the Year Award Winner: Community Category Bearspaw First Nation

Robert Shotclose

BEARSPAW FIRST NATION CEO

Rob Shotclose is a member of the Bearspaw First Nation, which has about 1,900 citizens. Rob is originally from Bearspaw First Nation's Satellite Reserve Eden Valley IR #216, which is located one hour southwest of Calgary. Rob has held the position of CEO of the Bearspaw First Nation since September 2011. Previously, he was the Bearspaw Band Manager from 2005-2009. Before his positions as CEO and Band Manager, Rob worked mainly in construction and ranch work before pursuing his education. He earned his Bachelor of Arts in Political Science from the University of Calgary in 2010 and has taken many professional development courses from the Banff Centre, CANDO, the National Aboriginal Lands Managers Association (NALMA), and local post-secondary institutions. Rob is married to Natalie, and they have two daughters, Rianne and Reegan. Rob says, "in my spare time, I like to play basketball, softball and golf. I enjoy reading, music, and attending my daughters' sporting and cultural events."

Since becoming CEO fourteen years ago, he has led the development of many profitable major businesses for the Nation. Rob project-managed and developed the Bearspaw Service Centre (Centex Gas Bar and C-store, Car Wash), and Subway Franchise from 2012-2014. He played a lead role in the development of the Stoney Nakoda Telecom (Internet, VOIP, and Shaw TV) company in 2012, which provides internet services to all three Stoney Nakoda Nations Reserves (Mini Thni, Eden Valley, and Bighorn). Rob also project-managed and developed the Bearspaw Kananaskis Travel Centre Project on Designated Lands in Mini Thni (Esso retail, ESSO Cardlock, C-store, electric charging stations and Tim Hortons) from 2016-2019.

When asked what Bearspaw First Nation's biggest economic development achievements have been under his leadership, Rob responded that their Kananaskis

Travel Centre (ESSO Cardlock, Esso Retail Fuel, C-store, and Tim Hortons Franchise) on the 8 acres of designated land adjacent to Stoney Nakoda Resort &Casino "has been a very profitable business for Bearspaw First Nation. This project, owned entirely by Bearspaw First Nation, has brought a much-needed service to this highly travelled corridor on the TransCanada Highway east of Canmore and Banff." Rob noted that the business has created 25 jobs for all three Stoney Nakoda Nations members. It is open 24 hours a day, 365 days a year and is strategically located close to the Mountain Parks. The facility has 12 Tesla chargers and 4 other electric chargers from Parkland Fuels. Rob also mentioned that on the highway to Kananaskis, Bearspaw First Nation has a Centex gas bar and Subway enterprise in Minithni (formerly known as Morley) that opened in 2013. It also created another 25 critically needed jobs for all three Stoney Nakoda Nations members.

Stoney Nakoda Telecom has been another successful enterprise, providing wireless and fibre high-speed internet to all three Stoney Nakoda Reserves (Mini Thni, Eden Valley and Bighorn). While Stoney Nakoda Telecom provides about 6-7 jobs, it has over 600 customers and offers a great service to the community that they would not otherwise have. Bearspaw First Nation has also acquired an internet service provider in Edmonton; they are building and managing important networks for other First Nations until they are ready to take them over.

Rob has worked with Chief and Council, along with Bearspaw First Nation's consultant, Munro and Associates Inc., to establish an independent Capital Trust for the Bearspaw First Nation. Bearspaw First Nation removed their funds, which were previously held in Ottawa (together with two other Stoney Nakoda Nations, Chiniki and Goodstoney First Nations), under Canada's Indian Moneys Legislation and Policy. According to Bearspaw First Nation, "The 'Ozija Thiha (Bears-paw in Stoney) Legacy Trust' was created to invest, grow, and protect Nation Members' Non-Renewable Mineral Royalties' and other funds for Future Generations." As of March 31, 2025, Bearspaw First Nation has $63 million in Trust Capital and an annual distribution of $3.4 million and growing. For more information, please see: www.bearspawcapitaltransfer.com.

Rob also serves on the Joint Eden Valley-GOA Task Force to exchange with the Province of Alberta Fee Simple lands for future economic development along Highway 541 for the Eden Valley Reserve 2018-2024. Bearspaw Development Corporation now manages 98 acres under fee simple.

Rob has been the Board Chair since 2011 of the "Mini Thni Foundation," which is the charity that manages Casino Revenues from the Stoney Nakoda Resort Casino. The Board oversees the spending of approximately $2 million in charity gaming revenues per year. Rob is also Board Chair of the Ozija Thiha Education Trust, which was established in 2022. It supports Bearspaw First Nation Post Secondary Students with bursaries and financial awards. Over $200 thousand has since been disbursed to Bearspaw students, mostly post-secondary students, from the Trust. For details, please see: Otet.ca.

Rob Shotclose serves on the Ozija Thiha Land Trust, which is tasked with the development of a 298-acre fee simple parcel of land in the Municipality of Rocky View County, along the Trans Canada Highway between Mini Thni and the City of Calgary, for the economic development of the Bearspaw First Nation. Rob has also

been the Bearspaw First Nation Representative on the Stoney Nakoda Nations Treaty Land Entitlement Committee since 2023. Canada has recognized that the three Stoney Nakoda Nations, including Bearspaw First Nation, are entitled to a total Treaty Land Entitlement shortfall of 21,696 acres.

Before Rob retires, he would like to see Bearspaw First Nation's Treaty Land Entitlement land claim settled and used to create urban reserves for economic development, residential developments, cultural areas, environmental protection, and Nation members attending education facilities in Calgary. Alberta. Bearspaw First Nation would like to get Alberta to the table. Bearspaw First Nation also has some fee simple land on Highway 1 west of Calgary. Regarding this land, Bearspaw wants to let people know that this is Bearspaw land and that we want to develop it for economic development, residential, senior facilities, medical, recreational, commercial, and more. Rob shared, "Bearspaw wants to build facilities for people to pursue treatments and surgeries on our land. We want to take care of surrounding communities as well as ourselves."

Bearspaw First Nation has accomplished so much in the field of Indigenous economic development through Rob Shotclose's leadership and the visionary work of his Nation. There is no doubt that Bearspaw First Nation is very deserving of CANDO's Community of the Year award. It is very clear that Rob and Bearspaw First Nation will be achieving even more in the world of economic development in the coming years.

2024 Cando Economic Developer of the Year Award Winner: Individual Category

Lisa Grant, Haisla First Nation

Lisa Grant has dedicated her career to preserving and supporting various aspects of her Indigenous heritage. Her journey began at the age of 18, working with Indigenous youth at a treatment center. She later expanded her efforts by engaging with youth through sports, eventually transitioning into the corporate world to continue making an impact.

In 2011, Lisa embarked on a new educational journey after relocating to her husband's hometown, where she was unable to secure a position in the youth care field. Today, she holds dual master's degrees in business administration, specializing in executive management and global management. Lisa also co-developed the graduate-level certificate in Indigenous economic development in collaboration with Royal Roads University and a colleague from the Haisla Nation.

Lisa is Heiltsuk on her mother's side and Gitga'at on her father's. Her father, a hereditary chief, was raised deeply rooted in traditional knowledge, which he has passed down through generations of oral storytelling—a practice Lisa continues to cherish and absorb to this day. Her mother, one of fourteen siblings, grew up in a large, tightly knit family supported by many adoptive relatives who enriched their community bonds.

"Our success as a community lies in paving the way to improve our lives—mentally, physically, emotionally, and spiritually—to the best of our abilities. By doing so, we empower every member to realize their potential and tackle challenges on their own. True success creates a ripple effect; the more of us who dedicate ourselves to growth, both personally and collectively, the more that positive impact will flow through our communities, shaping a brighter future for generations to come," she said.

"Few things are more fulfilling than using your education to create a brighter future for your community."

Lisa now serves as the Business Development Manager for yáqʷa Development Corporation, an organization dedicated to advancing the economic growth of the Haisla Nation. In 2014, Lisa married her husband at a beautiful ceremony in Honolulu, Hawaii. Shortly after, she promptly applied for a band transfer at the earliest opportunity.

Lisa has always been driven to achieve her best, shaped by the unwavering belief instilled in her from a young age that higher education was non-negotiable. Looking back, she feels deeply grateful to her parents, crediting their guidance for much of her success today.

Her parents also created an alcohol-free home, a choice that profoundly influenced Lisa on a fundamental level. Their steadfast support has been a constant throughout her life—from her early days as a preemie, born 11 weeks prematurely, to her incredible accomplishment of earning not one but two master's degrees.

Lisa served as an advisor for Rio Tinto in the areas of community engagement and communication, where she played a key role in supporting the Haisla Nation in organizing blanket exercises to share cultural teachings. These exercises were held in Kitimat, Haisla, Kemano, and Montreal, offering an invaluable opportunity to educate participants about the history of Indigenous peoples in Canada. By bringing Haisla community members and Rio Tinto employees together for these sessions, it created a thoughtful and impactful approach to fostering mutual understanding and cultural awareness.

While working at Rio Tinto, Lisa came across an opportunity for a Business Development Manager position with the Haisla Nation. With her ongoing education in business, she felt it was the perfect next step. She began the role in October 2020, right in the midst of the pandemic—a challenging time, but one that proved instrumental in her professional growth.

In this role, Lisa has been able to leverage her master's in global management, along with her prior education, to make a significant impact. One of her key achievements involved auditing a property management company that was underperforming, ultimately saving the Haisla Nation thousands of dollars annually. She also co-developed the graduate certificate in Indigenous economic development in partnership with Royal Roads University, demonstrating her dedication to fostering meaningful change. While working full-time, she successfully completed her master's in business administration with a focus on executive management, exemplifying her commitment to both professional growth and impactful leadership.

Lisa played a pivotal role in the CEDI two-year partnership between the Haisla Nation and the District of Kitimat, serving as a liaison to strengthen relationships and identify common ground between the two organizations. For 13 months, she served as the interim Deputy Chief Administrative Officer for Development, overseeing critical areas such as economic development, education and training, environment, fisheries, and lands.

During her tenure in executive management, Lisa represented Haisla Nation at the HaiSea tugboat naming ceremony in Turkey — a significant milestone for the Nation.

She also spearheaded efforts to pass six organization-wide information management policies and led the acquisition of the Sunrise General Merchandise Store. She played a key role in negotiating with the Government of British Columbia on the First Nations Direct Award Forest Tenure Opportunities (FTOA) and the Forest Consultation and Revenue Sharing Agreement (FCRSA).

Lisa was instrumental in the creation and launch of yáqʷa development corporation, a project that took two years of strategic planning and officially launched in April 2024. She initiated a campaign to name the corporation and design its logo, incorporating name and logo suggestions directly from Haisla members. Additionally, she facilitated the rebranding of Sunrise General Merchandise Store, which was renamed Gizua Market, complete with a new logo inspired by submissions from Haisla Nation members.

Her outstanding contributions to Indigenous economic development earned Lisa the Indigenous Economic Developer of the Year Award from CANDO, presented in Calgary in the fall of 2024.

On a personal note, Lisa's passion for growth and following her heart drives her accomplishments. In September 2024, she and her husband, Jason, purchased Terrace Refillery, now rebranded as Northwest Refillery Inc., in Terrace, BC. This eco-conscious business invites customers to bring their own containers—jars, shampoo bottles, and more—to refill with environmentally friendly products, promoting a sustainable lifestyle.

Lisa's dedication to community, innovation, and sustainability continues to shape her remarkable journey.

2024 Cando Economic Developer of the Year Award Winner: Individual Category: Indigenous Private Sector Business

Kaska Dena Designs

Natasha Peter

My name is Natasha Peter. I am a mother to a beautiful 6-year-old baby girl whom I'm proudly teaching Dena ways. I am a member of the Wolf Clan, as is my daughter. My family history line is Kaska, Northern Tutchone, Tlingit, and Scottish, a long line of strong people.

I am from the Kaska Dena lands of Ross River, Yukon, where I was raised with a deep appreciation for traditional ways of life. My grandmothers, Mary and Tootsie Charlie, gave me the name Gwensellia, which means Moose Skin Scrapper, a name that reflects the value our culture places on hard work. Growing up, I learned important skills like hunting, harvesting, sewing, and beading from my family and community, as well as from the Elders who shared their knowledge and wisdom with me. Their teachings have had a profound impact on who I am today and continue to inspire me in my work.

When I was a little girl, I began sewing, especially during my Kaska Dena language classes. As an adult, before I began Kaska Dena Designs, I had a full-time job in the mining industry in the Yukon. During this time, I was working in mining camps. I would go to the camp for 3-4 weeks at a time and began to lose interest in my culture. I decided to quit my work in mining and started to work for an Indigenous store in Whitehorse. I began to get back into sewing. It was healing for me before I realized it was. I had a passion for making crafts when I was younger and eventually began

a home business, Creative Dena Designs, in 2017. In my spare time, I fell in love with creating again. As time went on, my sewing and creative work began to heal me, and I just kept creating. When my home business, Creative Dena Designs, began to grow, I created a group page on Facebook, and that helped to grow my customer base Canada-wide. I began designing, manufacturing, and selling clothing and accessories through Facebook and in-person events. In 2022, I wanted to do this work as a full-time job, and that is when I established Kaska Dena Designs to reflect my First Nation and where I was raised. I had my first art exhibit in Whitehorse and began going to fashion shows. Next, I became an international designer. I was featured on runways in NY, Paris. Seeing people light up through my artwork feeds my passion for what I do. With a passion for honouring cultural traditions and a deep appreciation for the natural world, I am an artist and designer who creates unique clothing that celebrates our heritage and supports independent artists.

I draw inspiration from the land that heals, nourishes, and inspires us. We harvest a lot of raw materials from the land during the fall season and source supplies from people in our community, helping each other grow. I infuse each piece with warmth, colours, and peace. When I create, I channel a place of calmness and creativity, always keeping in mind the lessons and wisdom passed down by those who have taught me what I know to be true. My designs reflect the fighting spirit and strength of my grandparents, and I sew memories of those I love into every piece. The result is clothing that imbues its wearers with confidence, pride, and beauty. My work also represents a commitment to preserving cultural traditions and providing a legacy that future generations can appreciate and protect.

In my business, I provide high-quality, one-of-a-kind clothing that embodies the values of creativity, authenticity, and respect for cultural heritage. By supporting me as an independent artist, my customers are not only acquiring unique clothing that celebrates our heritage but they are also investing in the preservation and celebration of our culture

When I create, it comes from the place of honouring those who have taught me what I know to be true. Kaska Dena Design's Mission Statement is:

"The land heals us, nourishes us, and inspires us; it is our home. To be inspired by the environment is to see the natural beauty it offers us and reflect its warmth, colours, and peace for us to appreciate once more.

When I create, it comes from the heart. A place of calmness, creativity, and love for my culture. The strength and fighting spirit of my grandparents are what give my work its unique beauty. As I sew, memories of those I love are stitched in every piece I make. When they wear the clothing I make, my customers feel the confidence, pride, and beauty that my grandparents have taught. This is what makes my clothes so unique.

When I create, it is not only about me. It is also about providing a legacy that appreciates and protects the traditions that have defined me and my ancestors. In celebrating my culture, I can pass it down to future generations. When my customers wear my designs, they support me as an independent artist. This means providing for my daughter and myself."

One of my biggest achievements was overcoming my addictions. My grandparents were residential school survivors. The intergenerational trauma affected me. I overcame my addictions and created Kaska Dena Designs. Through my business, I am able to help people; it feels good to help people with their self-esteem and to feel beautiful. A lot of the models I choose are on their healing journey, and when we do these shows, I believe it is healing them and me at the same time. I like to choose models who have an interest in modeling but don't know how to get started. Through Kaska Dena Designs, I have created modeling opportunities for many Indigenous and non-Indigenous young women in the North and elsewhere in Canada, the United States, and Australia. I provide information and resources to help them with their careers after the show. I like finding ways to help others as I build my business. I feel a great sense of accomplishment, knowing that I am helping the models I select for my shows with their self-worth and confidence on their healing journey. Also, raising my 6-year-old daughter and seeing her grow is another great source of accomplishment. In being independent, I can do what I love.

Souga SinLa - Thank you

Looking After Everyone Right: The Fishing Lake First Nation Approach to Treaty Settlements

Tasha Brooks and Bob Kayseas

ABSTRACT

This case study explores how Fishing Lake First Nation (FLFN) responded to the $101.3 million "Cows and Plows" settlement under Treaty 4 by choosing long-term, Nation-led investment over one-time payouts. Confronted with internal tensions between per capita distribution demands and the need for intergenerational wealth, FLFN created the *Waywaynih Kunawapunteeing* Trust, a sovereign, legislated financial structure that protects capital, supports per capita payments through authorized loans, and generates sustainable returns to fund community priorities. Through culturally grounded governance, financial education, and strategic compromise, FLFN offers a replicable model for Indigenous Nations who are navigating the complexities of large-scale settlements. This study highlights the practical and political challenges of balancing immediate member benefit with enduring Nation-building, offering key insights for communities managing similar historic claims.

KEYWORDS: Treaty Settlements, First Nations Trusts, Per-capita distributions, Nation-building

Background

Over the past decade, Indigenous peoples and Nations across Canada have received a series of significant financial settlements related to historical injustices, such as the $3.18 billion residential school settlement (Crown-Indigenous Relations and Northern Affairs Canada [CIRNAC], 2019), the $1.47 billion Federal Indian Day School settlement (Needham, 2025), the $500-$750 million Sixties Scoop settlement (CIRNAC, 2020), and the $15.1 billion Agricultural Benefits settlement (CIRNAC, 2025a). In the near future, additional settlements, including the up to $200,000 individual Federal Indian hospitals class action and the Indigenous Services Canada (ISC) dental services class action, are anticipated (CIRNAC, 2025b; Lang, 2023). While these settlements represent important milestones for reconciliation, they also present new challenges and opportunities. Many individuals and communities are suddenly tasked with managing substantial sums of money, often without sufficient resources or culturally relevant financial literacy education (Blue, 2016).

A recent example can be found in the agricultural benefits specific claims, often referred to as the "Cows and Plows" settlements, which address the federal government's longstanding neglect in providing First Nations with the agricultural equipment and support promised in their treaties. These provisions were intended to help communities transition to sustainable agricultural economies (CIRNAC, 2024). The resulting settlements acknowledge the Canadian government's historic breach of its treaty obligations and responsibilities.

As of August 1, 2025, 53 agricultural benefit claims have been resolved in Treaties 4, 5, 6, and 10, resulting in more than $6.9 billion in compensation (CIRNAC, 2025a). For generations, the absence of these promised resources contributed to significant socio-economic gaps and intergenerational hardship. As these settlements are distributed, First Nations face important decisions about whether to use funds for per-capita distributions, invest in community priorities, or create structures for long-term collective benefit.

The experience of tribal communities in the United States demonstrates that per capita distributions and other windfalls, when provided without long-term strategies or governance safeguards, can be quickly consumed by immediate needs, sometimes exacerbating dependency and leaving recipients and their Nations in weaker financial positions than before (Crepelle, 2024). Research shows that nearly 90 percent of every dollar spent within First Nations communities leaves the First Nations economy, meaning only approximately 10 cents of every dollar remains in the community to circulate further and benefit the community (Mirzaei et al., 2020). At both the individual and national levels, communities often face intense pressure to provide immediate benefits, most commonly through per-capita distributions. Nevertheless, inspiring examples demonstrate that when communities pool resources and plan for the future, investment can become a catalyst for nation-building and reducing leakage by focusing on collective priorities such as education, health, homeownership, and economic self-determination (Coast Funds, n.d.; Rainy River First Nations Trust, 2025).

Despite these challenges, the resolution of specific claims such as "Cows and Plows" represents a meaningful step in Canada's reconciliation process and the

ongoing journey to restore trust and fulfill treaty promises. However, as highlighted by community leaders, the actual impact of these settlements will depend on the choices made today. Darcy Desjarlais, Chief of Fishing Lake First Nation (FLFN) expressed:

> When our ancestors entered into Treaty, they did so at a time when our people were suffering. They signed not only for their own needs, but with foresight for the generations to come. That same thinking guided us as we created this Trust, designed not only to help our people today, but to ensure future generations have opportunities our ancestors were denied. This settlement is about more than money; it is about creating an economic foundation that can grow, give back, and pull our Nation forward, helping us reclaim what was lost and build a better future (D. Desjarlais, personal communication, August 2025).

This study explores how one Nation has approached the distribution and investment of settlement funds, offering lessons for communities navigating similar opportunities and challenges in a time of unprecedented financial change. As part of this work, we interviewed current Chief Darcy Desjarlais and former Chief Derek Sunshine to provide additional context and leadership perspectives.

Restoring Treaty Promises Through Nation-Led Investment and Governance: The Case of Fishing Lake First Nation

In 2025, FLFN ratified a $101.3 million settlement agreement with the Government of Canada to resolve a longstanding Treaty 4 Agricultural Benefits Specific Claim (CIRNAC, 2025a). These provisions were designed to support First Nations in their transition to agriculture through the provision of tools, livestock, seed, and training. FLFN, like many other Nations, received little to no support from these promised resources, undermining their capacity to develop a self-sufficient agricultural economy and causing long-term structural harm to their economic development.

This settlement was not FLFN's first experience with land claims or settlement management. The Nation had previously pursued resolution for the 1907 surrender of part of its reserve lands, a surrender negotiated under questionable circumstances with the involvement of federal officials and the Reverend Dr. John McDougall (Indian Claims Commission Proceedings, 2002). That claim was resolved in 2002 with a $35 million settlement, which at the time was the largest settlement in Saskatchewan (CBC, 2002). Leadership established a trust that has since returned approximately $35 million to the community while simultaneously growing to $44 million. With the Nation having already experienced the benefits of protecting capital and reinvesting earnings, members and leadership approached the 2025 Agricultural Benefits settlement with both the advantage of experience and a degree of confidence in the trust model as a vehicle for intergenerational prosperity.

Faced with this historic opportunity, FLFN made a deliberate decision to structure the settlement not solely as a one-time per-capita payout, but as a platform for

intergenerational health, wealth, and prosperity. While some members expected or hoped for complete per-capita distributions, Chief and Council took a principled stance: the compensation was not personal income, but restitution to the Nation for a collective breach of Treaty. This framing shaped the approach and guided every structural decision that followed.

To preserve the funds and ensure long-term benefit, FLFN established the *Waywaynih Kunawapunteeing* Trust. Translating to "looking after everyone right," the Trust is designed as a permanent instrument for stewardship and Nation-building. The Trust is structured so that the principal remains protected, while annual returns support community needs.

Borrowing against the Trust is strictly controlled, ensuring that as long as borrowing costs stay lower than returns on the principal, the Trust continues to grow and provide benefits for future generations. At the same time, the Trust enabled a one-time per capita distribution to members, with minors to receive their share upon reaching the age of 18, delivering an immediate and tangible benefit while preserving the Trust's long-term value.

Importantly, this payment was made through an authorized loan from the Trust, preserving the Trust capital while providing a short-term but meaningful benefit. This approach mitigated community tension, ensured fairness, and maintained fiscal responsibility. It provided both immediate benefits and future security.

Still, the decision was not without controversy. In the lead-up to the ratification vote, some members questioned why a greater share of the funds were not allocated directly to community members. Others questioned whether Council had the authority to restrict access to what they regarded as a personal entitlement. The debate was highly charged, shaped both by a long history of unmet needs and by the pressing realities faced by community members in the present.

Leadership Reflections

Chief and Council, with the support of legal and financial advisors, addressed this tension head-on by hosting information sessions, sharing the complete Trust agreement, and emphasizing the intent of the Treaty. The Treaty 4 Benefits Claim Agreement Information Package (Piapot First Nation, 2024) stated that the benefits were intended to last "as long as the sun shines and the rivers flow," a principle that leadership embraced and carried forward. The decisions around the settlement were not made lightly. Both past and present leaders emphasized that genuine leadership entails a balance between immediate needs and long-term stability. Their reflections provide insight into the foundational values that underpin FLFN's approach.

When considering the history of the settlement, Chief Darcy Desjarlais suggested that "This settlement isn't just for those alive today, it's also for those who came before, who never benefited, and for future generations who deserve stability" (D. Desjarlais, personal communication, August 2025.) Furthermore, in an interview with Former Chief Derek Sunshine, he stated, "It's always best to leave something for those not yet here. It's not their fault we're in this situation; it's the history of Canada, a history that

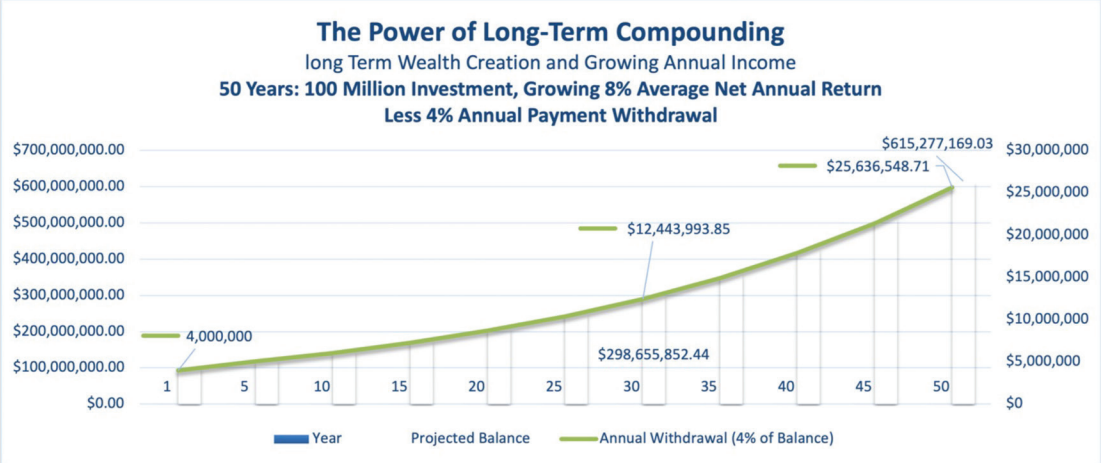
forgot the real First Peoples of this country" (D. Sunshine, personal communication, August 2025).

Both Chief Desjarlais and Former Chief Sunshine were supported by Council members who shared the same understanding and values, creating a common understanding of the rationale for structuring the Trust in the way that was ultimately chosen. Former Chief Sunshine stated, "Opportunities like this don't happen every day. When they do, we must make sure they benefit the Nation far into the future."

The *Waywaynih Kunawapunteeing* Trust

"Thirty, forty, fifty years from now, people will look back and know this was the right decision," (D. Desjarlais, personal communication, August 2025). The Trust is designed to grow steadily, As illustrated in Figure 1, The Power of Long-Term Compounding, the Trust is structured for steady growth. With careful investment targeting approximately 8% annual returns, projections indicate that its value could surpass $615 million within 50 years, generating roughly $25 million annually to support community priorities. Strict rules govern the Trust. The Chief and Council cannot alter the Trust to access the principal, and all spending must align with the Nation's Revenue Trust Law. The Nation selects the investment managers and receives quarterly and annual performance reports, which will also be shared with members.

FIGURE 1
The Power of Long-Term Compounding



This model offers clear lessons for other Nations. First, FLFN's experience demonstrates that settlements can be more than just restitution; they can also serve as the foundation for economic self-determination and intergenerational wealth. Second, balancing immediate needs with long-term benefit is not only possible but essential. The hybrid approach taken by FLFN, providing a meaningful per capita distribution while preserving capital for future generations, reflects a pragmatic and values-driven compromise. Third, the use of Indigenous legal frameworks (in this case, the Revenue

Trust Law) ensures that financial governance remains grounded in community values and priorities, rather than being dictated by federal oversight. Chief Desjarlais offered his viewpoint about why long-term thinking is so important, "opportunities like this don't come often. Leadership means thinking long-term, not just giving in to short-term pressure" (D. Desjarlais, personal communication, August 2025).

Canada is not a party to the Trust, nor does it hold any oversight. This was, from beginning to end, a Nation-led process. The FLFN case challenges the narrative that per capita distribution and long-term investment are mutually exclusive. It also challenges the assumption that financial stewardship must come at the expense of community empowerment. Instead, it shows that with strong leadership, clear communication, and culturally grounded financial design, Nations can reclaim their treaty rights and transform them into long-term economic sovereignty.

In the words of FLFN Chief Desjarlais, "This money belongs to people past, present, and future. If our ancestors had paid it all out, there would be nothing for us today" (D. Desjarlais, personal communication, August 2025) and former Chief Sunshine explained, "if we gave it all out right away, it wouldn't have helped our people. The money would have ended up in white society, and a year later, our members would be in the same place, asking the same questions" (D. Sunshine, personal communication, August 2025). As other Nations consider how to approach specific claims and settlement negotiations, the Fishing Lake First Nation model provides a compelling and practical blueprint, one that centres Nationhood, intergenerational wealth, and the vision of Mino Pimâtisiwin: a good life, for all, for as long as the sun shines.

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Economic Self-Determination in Action: Sii T'ax Development Corporation's Achievements as an Independent Economic Development Corporation

By Bertram Mercer

Written by Mia Brown
(in collaboration with, and based on input/ interviews with, Bertram Mercer)

A New Chapter: Nisga'a Economic Self-Determination

April 1, 2025, signalled a pivotal shift in the economic trajectory of the Gitlaxt'aamiks community and the wider Nisga'a Nation. On this day, the Sii T'ax Development Corporation (STDC) emerged as the independent economic arm of the Gitlaxt'aamiks Village Government (GVG) (B. Mercer, personal communication, April 2025). This transition formally designates STDC as the independent economic entity of GVG while granting it the freedom to pursue business development, forge new partnerships, and drive employment initiatives with greater autonomy. As Bert Mercer (STDC's business manager) explains, STDC became the independent economic arm of GVG due to Nisga'a Treaty requirements: under the Nisga'a Final Agreements framework, business and economic development are no longer carried out under GVG, whose primary mandate is governance. Instead, economic development is carried out at arm's length from the Village Government to avoid creating liability for the Nation. And while Nisga'a's four villages already had their own economic development officers, the Nisga'a Final Agreement formalizes the requirement that business and economic development be managed by independent development corporations. This piece examines how this transition created new pathways towards greater community prosperity, capacity-building, and cross-Nation collaborations, rooted in Nisga'a values.

Historical Foundations: Nisga'a Final Agreement, Treaty Rights, and Economic Transformation

Nisga'a Nation is the first Nation in British Columbia to sign a modern treaty. The Nisga'a Final Agreement was ratified on May 11th, 2000, the culmination of 113 years of steadfast advocacy and resiliency while the Nation pursued recognition from the provincial and federal governments. In recognition of the 113-year struggle, the main roadway connecting the Four Nisga'a Villages was later named Highway 113. The Treaty initiated a new phase of self-governance and created economic development opportunities for the Nation, largely as a result of agreement provisions that limited the Indian Act's authority over the Nation's internal affairs (Nisga'a Lisims Government, n.d.). Per capita dollars were no longer restricted by the former Department of Indian Affairs, and federal and provincial funding allowed for greater access to revenue. The Treaty granted the Nation full ownership of approximately 2,000 km2 of traditional Nisga'a land (Nisga'a Lisims Government, n.d.), along with the authority to enact bylaws and regulations: this created jobs, such as bylaw enforcement officers, paid through the Nisga'a Lisims Government.

Right after the Treaty took effect, economic development was still closely tied to the Village Government (GVG) while things were in a transition period, and the Nation was getting the new structures up and running. Decisions about when to create a separate development corporation (and what sits under government versus at arm's length) took time; they were shaped by relationships, roles, and where people felt responsibility and recognition should sit. It took time to get clarity and consensus before establishing a separate development corporation.

The Early Days: The Initial Role of Sii T'ax Development Corporation

While the Treaty benefited the Nation, GVG did not have an official Development Corporation until 2002. In the beginning, the STDC had a board of seven directors, who were tasked with managing Gitlaxt'aamiks Villages' housing corporation and cable TV services. Bert Mercer explains how this led to improved infrastructure, as "through GVG, there was a huge increase in housing development; though we were using outside contractors … lots in the village filled up and expansion became necessary over time. House quality improved and as of today, we need to further expand" (personal communication, April 2025). Economic development also increased because "the Nation could negotiate Impact Benefit Agreements (IBAs) with the mining sector" (B. Mercer, personal communication, April 2025), which was not possible before the Treaty due to the need for government approval. Mercer also notes that the Nation's Fish and Wildlife capacity improved after the Treaty was signed, and the Department of Fisheries and Oceans Canada (DFO) "interfered less with us than with non-treaty Nations" (personal communication, April 2025).

Treaty Impacts: Economic and Local Capacity Growth

A great present-day example of this economic improvement lies within STDC's involvement with Nisga'a Lisims Government Fish and Wildlife Committee. This year's successful Nisga'a Commercial Inland Fishing Program saw fishers from the four Nisga'a Villages of Gitlaxt'aamiks, Gingolx, Laxgaltsap, and Gitwinksihlkw gather on the Nass River. The program's six two-day openings in July and August of 2025 generated $476,408 through its partner Aerotrading: of that amount, $395,308 was paid to the fishermen from the four Nisga'a Villages, with the program earning $80,000 in profit. Mercer successfully oversaw Gitlaxt'aamiks Village's portion of the program, alongside GVG's Economic Development Officer, and notes, "It didn't just generate money, it generated employment and not only that, but a huge revenue stream for people within the Fish and Wildlife industry as well as community wealth" (personal communication, April 2025).

The 2025 Transition: STDC's Move to Operational Independence

This history culminated in the resolution for STDC to become the independent economic arm of GVG. The January 20, 2025, ratification granted STDC complete economic and operational autonomy from GVG: STDC now handles its own HR, financial, and operational oversight. And while STDC still reports to GVG as its majority shareholder, the development corporation's redefined liability and governance allow it to pursue business opportunities within a much shorter and more flexible decision-making window, no longer having to schedule around GVG's already busy agenda.

The benefits of this arrangement speak for themselves. Granting STDC the commercial agility needed for rapid strategic financial actions has allowed them to forge partnerships that reflect community priorities—all while preserving a collaborative, good faith rapport with GVG (B. Mercer, personal communication, April 2025). STDC's more nimble and responsive decision-making process has resulted in shortened project-approval timelines, streamlined employee onboarding, and more efficient resource allocation (B. Mercer, personal communication, April 2025). STDC now operates at a speed and structure that has proven to be highly successful, sparking local jobs and talent, generating an operational surplus, and revitalizing the Gitlaxt'aamiks economy.

Building Partnerships: Governance Realignment and Shareholder Structure

The shift from oversight by GVG to an independent economic arm signals the dawn of a transformative era for STDC—but at the heart of this achievement is the push to keep a strong, transparent, and cross-functional relationship with GVG. This important partnership ensures that strategic choices, long-term planning, and overall accountability remain intact while STDC navigates its new operational independence. STDC's commitment to transparent communication, joint planning efforts, and quarterly reporting structures reflects its belief that economic and operational independence is

not a sign of separation but a means of strengthening its capacity to work alongside the Village Government in a complementary, mutually supportive partnership.

The STDC transition provides a model that other Nations can follow when shifting from Nation-run operations toward independent, community-driven economic ventures. STDC's journey to independence has provided a rich toolbox of lessons, from how to craft governance structures, reconcile autonomy with accountability, strengthen workforce capacity, harness both local and regional partnerships, and weave sustainable practices into the very fabric of everyday business. And by emphasizing collaboration, transparency, and shared objectives, STDC shows that First Nations and Indigenous organizations can pursue economic development while maintaining cooperative partnerships with the Nation's government, a model that can motivate, educate, and guide other communities walking a similar path.

Early Outcomes: Jobs, Surplus, and Revitalized Local Enterprises

Since the post-transition period, STDC has revitalized several cornerstone community enterprises such as the Lava Roc Restaurant, the Lava Roc gift shop, and the New Aiyansh Gas Bar/Convenience Store (B. Mercer, personal communication, April 2025). Each of these operations now reports a surplus, or, as Mercer puts it, each of these are "in the black," a testament to exemplary fiscal stewardship and effective local management. Operational choices have been purposefully and strategically linked to the community's long-term goals. STDC's partnership with Sysco for the Lava Roc Restaurant and New Aiyansh Gas Bar has ironed out the restaurant's supply chain, ensuring a steady flow of quality fare. Meanwhile, the kitchen tucked behind the gas bar has become a local hotspot, generating steady employment and meeting the community's food-access needs: Mercer has brought in local entrepreneurs to make bread and baked goods, which are popular among the community and often sell out daily at the gas bar kitchen (B. Mercer, personal communication, April 2025). These businesses are examples of how STDC is stepping up to support Nisga'a-owned businesses and support Indigenous employment.

Ultimately, STDC's economic and operational independence translates into capacity-building for Gitlaxt'aamiks and the Nisga'a Nation by uplifting local entrepreneurs. The corporation places a clear focus on employing Nisga'a citizens, and when a role can't be filled locally, STDC reaches out to partner with other First Nations or Indigenous businesses, pursuing Indigenous procurement and job creation and strengthening broader Indigenous economic collaboration (B. Mercer, personal communication, April 2025). Likewise, STDC runs on the Ksi Lisims direct-award model, deliberately steering clear of the textbook Request for Proposal/Request for Quotation (RFP/RFQ) process and instead awarding contracts to partners whose operations and philosophies align with local values and the distinct economic priorities of STDC. Across British Columbia, the Direct Award model is gathering momentum as First Nations and Indigenous governments work to strengthen and renew authority over activities established on the land. This specific model hands STDC the power and freedom to advance employment targets, safeguard the environment, and select

contractors and partners whose practices correspond with treaty rights. It allows the Nation to set the rules of the partnership instead of being forced to fit into an external procurement system. Choosing the Ksi Lisims direct-award model demonstrates how structural independence can ensure that the next chapter of economic development is managed by Indigenous communities and that their chosen partners support Indigenous aspirations.

Workforce Development: Mentorship and Indigenous Employment Pathways

Another initiative is STDC's partnership with Wildlife Protection Solutions (WPS). STDC has forged a path for Nisga'a and Gitlaxt'aamiks Village community members to secure certification as wildlife monitors. WPS provides an apprenticeship-style training program, anchored in insights into animal behaviours, meticulous environmental risk assessment, and the strategic use of nonlethal deterrence tactics (J. Roscher, personal communication, April 2025). Guided by a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with STDC, the program delineates three pathways: training, staffing, and mentorship. Participants are paired with highly experienced wildlife monitors, which enables them to grow confidence and advance their expertise through real-world experiences. The ultimate goal is to strengthen participants' environmental and ethical awareness, equip them with transferable skills, and prepare them to assume invaluable roles within projects.

STDC is currently exploring a longer-term partnership with WPS to construct a wildlife-safety policy for the Nisga'a Nation. This initiative would mark a shift from a reactive stance to proactive wildlife management and allows for further local employment opportunities, all while strengthening land stewardship. WPS will provide wildlife-monitoring training for up to 12 Nisga'a members, specifically those who reside in Gitlaxt'aamiks Village/New Aiyansh. As Jessica Roscher, the owner of WPS, explains, by joining together, STDC and GVG can champion a cutting-edge policy that draws on Indigenous knowledge and corresponds with the practicalities of today's industrial world (personal communication, April 2025). STDC is also working to build mentorship structures situated inside the organization. With STDC's guidance, staff members at the Lava Roc Restaurant and the New Aiyansh gas bar are acquiring trade skills and amplifying their business instincts, setting them up for future management roles or other entrepreneurial ventures. This all-encompassing approach means workforce development is woven into every facet of STDC's operations and philosophy.

Looking ahead, STDC is moving to strengthen workforce development partnerships with regional colleges and to roll out apprenticeship pathways in trades such as mechanics, logistics, and welding—fields that are currently in high demand due to STDC's aggregate and energy projects. Mercer emphasizes that training isn't a one-off obligation; it's a worthy investment in community (B. Mercer, personal communication, April 2025). The aim of these longer-term plans is to grow a pipeline of talent that is grounded in community. Placing workforce development partnerships and mentorship models at the forefront, STDC is sowing the seeds of Indigenous leadership and business

acumen. From youth to Elders, Nisga'a citizens are being trained with fresh sets of skills, creating clear pathways to careers and allowing for a strong voice in steering the economic future of the Nisg̲a'a Nation.

Sustainable Development and Energy Innovation: A Zero-Emission Future

Sustainability is a pillar of STDC's long-term vision. Having moved beyond GVG oversight, STDC has the power to secure energy solutions while cutting through red tape and fostering industry partnerships. Take the New Aiyansh gas bar, for example: as of April 1st, 2025, the gas bar has been dispensing a canola-oil-derived fuel that slashes greenhouse gas emissions and carries a minimal environmental impact. STDC is also exploring floating liquified natural gas (LNG) technologies that support economic development ambitions and environmental caretaking (B. Mercer, personal communication, April 2025). And by taking part in forums via the Nisga'a Industry Relations Office, STDC is on the lookout for new and sustainable energy innovations, safeguarding the Nation's ambition to participate in the consistently shifting clean-energy economy. With that freedom, STDC can now chart its course in researching, piloting, and deploying energy technologies that better align with Indigenous values while accounting for boots-on-the-ground geographic constraints and the region's economic possibilities.

Strategic Partnerships: Building Capacity Through Joint Ventures and Direct-Award Models

The partnership between Stromsten C&C and STDC signals an advance in boosting local infrastructure and aggregate capacity. Operating out of the Grease Trail gravel quarry, the venture is slated to produce 10,000 cubic meters of gravel each year, with the option to scale up if provincial permits allow. The quarry's activity is also driving up the demand for a suite of supporting trades such as welders, mechanics, and logistics providers. This ripple effect increases the project's footprint and significantly improves the community's cross-sector capacity.

Supported by resolutions from both GVG and Wilp Si'ayuukhl Nisg̲a'a (WSN), the venture embeds training opportunities into its core philosophy. The owner and operator of Stromsten C&C, Matt Stromsten, is committed to mentoring Nisga'a employees on quarry operations, safety practices, and heavy-equipment handling, laying the groundwork for transferring ownership to the community (personal communication, April 2025). The initiative works alongside STDC's economic development and self-sufficiency objectives via multiyear contracts (including those linked to the Ksi Lisims LNG project) that provide community members with the opportunity to obtain trucks, secure commercial-driving certification, and operate as subcontractors: this is a crucial step towards supporting local entrepreneurs and small enterprises.

Lessons for Other Nations: A Replicable Model of Indigenous-Led Economic Development

STDC's evolution from a government-run venture into a community-guided economic development corporation highlights how granting autonomy, when balanced with joint oversight, can enhance local capacity, nurture economic growth, and allow the development corporation the freedom to act in alignment with community priorities. The cornerstone of any effort to mirror this transition is securing economic and operational independence. Nations must formally untether the development corporation from the government and transparently lay out its activities for shareholders. Formal agreements and adherence to Indigenous-governance and financial regulations is indispensable for ensuring accountability, building credibility amongst shareholders, and safeguarding operational integrity.

Equally crucial is preserving a constructive collaboration with the governmental body or majority shareholder. Regular dialogue, open and transparent reporting, and co-planned workshops help ensure that independence complements government oversight rather than replacing it. By aligning their goals with long-term community prosperity, Nations can foster a partnership dynamic with independent economic development corporations in which self-sufficiency and accountability thrive together.

Effective governance structures must also juggle community representation with professional expertise. Involving community members helps to ensure that choices reflect the community's priorities and values, while technical specialists, such as lawyers, HR specialists, and business consultants, contribute to the operational and financial expertise needed. When decision-making authority is clearly defined and accountability mechanisms are in place, the delicate balance between independence and oversight can be maintained.

Conclusion: A Viable Path Towards Self-Directed Growth

STDC's hiring model and focus on mentorship and training allow for successful routes to leadership and entrepreneurial ventures within the Nation. By interlacing skill development across every department and forging apprentice partnerships in highly coveted trades such as logistics, mechanics, and environmental management, STDC cultivates a workforce that is both locally skilled and resilient. Direct awards or Nation-specific procurement frameworks serve as levers for economic self-determination. Steering contracts toward Indigenous-owned businesses that support community priorities catalyzes capacity-building and hands-on training, while planting the seeds of opportunity. In this way, procurement practices advance long-term social objectives while uplifting the local business ecosystem. Incremental collaborations and purpose-driven capital can reinforce credibility while supporting expansion. By joining together with businesses in joint venture partnerships, pathways emerge to cultivate local expertise, exchange knowledge, and anchor investments in long-term community priorities from infrastructure to energy and economic diversification; this helps guarantee that the resulting growth lifts the entire Nation as a whole. Integrating environmental priorities into decision-making is just as crucial. Weaving a commitment

to environmental stewardship and traditional knowledge into everyday operations helps ensure that growth stays true to community principles. Autonomy then enables Nations to trial their initiatives more efficiently, while still aligning their shared oversight and long-term vision.

At the end of the day, writing down and noting what has been learned, as well as taking a moment to mull over those insights, is what keeps the wheels turning toward improvement and lasting achievement. Cataloguing both wins and stumbling blocks builds a platform for sound governance, capacity-enhancement, and economic progress: this illustrates that a firm sense of operational independence can go hand-in-hand with cooperative partnerships with village governments. By putting collaboration, transparency, and common goals at the forefront, Nations can create a path toward self-directed growth while protecting cultural roots, enacting good governance, and supporting emerging capacity within their communities.

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Seeds of Self-Determination: How Snuneymuxw Built Economic Power

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ABSTRACT
This case study examines the development of the Petroglyph Development Group (PDG), the economic organization of the Snuneymuxw First Nation (SFN), tracing its growth from initial community-based ventures to larger undertakings such as the co-management of Saysutshun (Newcastle Island Marine Park) and the acquisition of Casino Nanaimo and Elements Casino Victoria. These initiatives illustrate how gradual capacity-building and learning processes allowed the Nation to engage in complex economic activities over time. This case study highlights four central practices found in the Snuneymuxw experience: starting with manageable projects that build operational knowledge and human capital; maintaining a long-term vision for development; aligning investments with cultural values and place-based priorities; and diversifying revenue sources to strengthen economic resilience. The PDG's trajectory highlights how community-led planning and culturally grounded decision-making can shape sustainable pathways toward self-determination and economic sovereignty.

For over 5,000 years, the Snuneymuxw First Nation (SFN) has hunted, fished, and lived in Vancouver Island's central east coast. Despite this long history, colonial policies such as the 1854 Douglas Treaty and the Indian Act's land reductions resulted in the Nation retaining only a fraction of its traditional territory (SFN, n.d.). However, 2014's Thap'qum Specific Claim marked a turning point, with the $50 million and 70-acre settlement providing financial resources, land, and formal recognition of treaty violations (SFN, n.d.).

Like many Indigenous Nations across Canada, SFN views economic development as a means to advance self-determination, cultural preservation, and greater independence from provincial and federal constraints. To achieve this, in 2014, the Nation established the Petroglyph Development Group (PDG), which is owned by the SFN and governed by a board made up of Snuneymuxw Chief and Council members (PDG, n.d.). In its early years, PDG focused on smaller initiatives, including the Tuytaxun General Store, which provided employment opportunities for community members and a steady platform for learning the mechanics of running community-owned businesses (PDG, n.d.). As Eliot White-Hill, Kwulasultun (who works with PDG) explains, the work "brings me a lot of pride to be able to help advance economic reconciliation for SFN, to contribute towards the creation of new jobs and careers for our people, and to work towards establishing sustainable wealth for future generations" (Vancouver Island University, 2021). Importantly, the lessons SFN and PDG learned from their involvement in the community and the store created a framework that allowed them to pursue larger and more complex ventures over time.

One of these larger challenges was the stewardship of Saysutshun, also known as Newcastle Island Marine Park. For SFN, this place has always been a sacred village site for hosting ceremonies, as well as a traditional hunting ground ("Newcastle to Saysutshun," 2021). In Hul'q'umi'num, a Coast Salish language spoken by the Snuneymuxw people, Saysutshun means 'training for running,' which contextualizes the island's use as a place of preparation.

Today, PDG cares for Saysutshun in partnership with BC Parks. Visitors are welcomed with cultural and tourism experiences that reflect Snuneymuxw knowledge and practice, including walking tours guided by community members, traditional salmon barbecues, and programs bringing the land's stories to life (PDG, n.d.). These activities generate income while also strengthening connections to land, language, and identity. For SFN, economic development expresses identity, strengthens community capacity, and creates opportunities that will carry forward to future generations. These ventures illustrate a broader movement that integrates traditional values with contemporary governance and positions economic empowerment as a mechanism for nation-building, allowing SNF to identify and address their specific needs without external oversight.

The shift from small-scale enterprises to transformative projects reached a new level in June 2024, when PDG signed an agreement with Great Canadian Entertainment to acquire Casino Nanaimo, located on Snuneymuxw traditional territory (Nightingale, 2025). The deal included operational control and the transfer of the land title, reaffirming SFN's territorial and economic sovereignty (Great Canadian Entertainment, 2024). In September 2024, PDG further extended its reach through a second agreement to

acquire Elements Casino Victoria (Sweetman, 2024). These landmark acquisitions were finalized in January 2025, following regulatory approvals by the BC Lottery Corporation and the Gaming Policy and Enforcement Branch (Porter, 2025). Under the agreement terms, PDG received two years of transitional operational support from Great Canadian Entertainment to facilitate a seamless handover (Durling, 2024). PDG's current focus includes maintaining Great Canadian Casino's staffing structure, integrating the newly acquired teams, and deploying operations to generate revenue that supports broader community investments (Porter, 2025). This will ensure a smooth transition and a reliable revenue flow to support SFN's ongoing development goals.

This investment was a major step on the community's road to self-determination, reflecting years of negotiations and vision. In an interview with Canadian Gaming Business, PDG CEO Ian Simpson highlighted that Snuneymuxw leadership has been working toward casino ownership since the 1990s with an eye towards long-term economic independence (Porter, 2025). By acquiring the Nanaimo Casino, SFN regained control over a valuable downtown asset and reclaimed land at the heart of its historic Xwsol'lexwel village site. PDG and SNF leadership emphasized that future development around the casino will center on community benefits while honouring the location's cultural significance (Johnny K, 2024).

Furthermore, the acquisition of the two casinos was motivated by a culturally rooted connection to gaming. As Simpson stated, "Gaming culture is very much part of the fabric of Snuneymuxw" (Porter, 2025, para. 5). Traditional games, such as Slahal, have been played by the Coast Salish People for thousands of years. According to oral history, the game was given to them by the creator, and game pieces over 14,000 years old have been found (Deveiteo, 2021). This deep-rooted connection highlights how these acquisitions align not only with SFN's economic priorities but their cultural ones as well.

Indeed, the significance of these acquisitions goes far beyond the economic. Snuneymuxw Chief Mike Wyse emphasizes these sites' symbolic importance for land reclamation, national sovereignty, and the foundational structure of the Nation (Nightingale, 2025). And, as PDG President Erralyn Joseph notes, these acquisitions returned sacred ancestral village sites to the community (Johnny K, 2024). In light of this, SFN is currently exploring sustainable housing and infrastructure on lands previously occupied by Camp Nanaimo, a former military camp whose lands were transferred to the Nation in 2024 (Province of British Columbia, 2024; Rawnsley, 2024).

These acquisitions represent decades of Indigenous economic planning, persistent negotiation, and strategic pursuit of self-determination. The acquisition of Casino Nanaimo and Elements Casino Victoria signals a return of economic agency to SFN, establishing a visible presence on ancestral land and laying the financial groundwork for long-term, culturally rooted development. For many SFN members, these transactions are viewed as generational victories in reclaiming jurisdiction over territory, infrastructure, and capital investments previously denied to the community.

One of the most immediate impacts is the generation of own-source revenue, which is income derived from economic ventures that are independent of federal or

provincial transfers. These funds can be reinvested in essential programs, such as housing, language revitalization, youth outreach, elder care, and infrastructure, without the restrictions often associated with government funding (Petroglyph Development Group, 2025). Through PDG's stewardship of gaming profits, SFN is expanding its investment portfolio while maintaining direct control over spending priorities, without the oversight of provincial and federal governments.

Equally important is the emphasis on employment and workforce development. PDG leadership affirmed that both casino acquisitions retained existing staff and prioritized professional development for SFN members (Porter, 2025). These efforts align with the Nation's broader goals to build human capital and foster long-term career pathways within the local economy. PDG's portfolio today includes work in gaming, tourism, cannabis, transportation, and land management, a portfolio that reflects years of deliberate effort, thoughtful partnerships, and a consistent focus on creating lasting economic opportunities. Furthermore, by investing in different industries, the Nation is reducing risks and opening new pathways for professional development. This approach supports economic resilience and creates a broader range of opportunities for individuals within the community to grow and thrive.

Looking ahead, the Snuneymuxw First Nation is well-positioned to generate sustained revenue, attract visitors, expand trade, and influence regional planning decisions. Building on a strong foundation of culturally aligned development, the Nation has demonstrated how strategic planning and economic diversification can support long-term community well-being. Over the coming decade, Snuneymuxw is becoming a leading example of Indigenous-led urban renewal, where economic growth strengthens both cultural vitality and political independence. Future development will continue to advance prosperity on the Nation's own terms and within its traditional territories.

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Introduction

David Newhouse

In this issue, we present three papers:

Kayseas and Baldwin, in *Dụhụ ası k'ëch'á – Things Are Changing: Climate Change, Afforestation, and Indigenous Economic Opportunity in Northern Saskatchewan*, describe the impact of climate change on Indigenous communities in northern Saskatchewan, particularly its effects on barren-ground caribou, whose loss threatens traditional practices and the Denesuliné way of life. The study focuses on the benefits and costs of high-altitude afforestation as a mitigation strategy.

Salo, in *Securing Futures: The Inuvialuit Regional Corporation and Reindeer Herding History*, explores the complex history of reindeer herding in North America and contextualizes its connections to other Arctic Indigenous nations, from the Sámi to its contemporary management by the Inuvialuit Regional Corporation (IRC). This article contributes to the broader discourse on Indigenous governance, economic sustainability, and the pivotal role of traditional knowledge in shaping future pathways for Indigenous communities in the Arctic and beyond.

Brooks and Gowans, in *Indigenous Economic Development Education: Aligning Curriculum with Community Aspirations in Canada*, examine how to align post-secondary education curricula with community needs. Based on a literature review, interviews, and an online survey of Indigenous economic practitioners, they find that the curriculum should include entrepreneurship and business skills, financial literacy, leadership, governance, cultural competence, legal and regulatory frameworks, and Indigenous knowledge systems.

Dụhụ asi k'ëch'á – Things Are Changing: Climate Change, Afforestation, and Indigenous Economic Opportunity in Northern Saskatchewan

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

We have no conflicts of interest to disclose. This research has been approved by the University of Regina Research Ethics Board and Ya'thi Néné Lands and Resources.
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sustainable pathways toward self-determination and economic sovereignty.

ABSTRACT

Indigenous communities in Northern Canada face rapid climate change that threatens their local ecosystems, food security, cultural ties to the land, and connections to the rest of Canada. Participating in climate adaptation efforts is crucial for Indigenous well-being, self-determination, and economic involvement amid a changing climate. We interviewed a total of 11 people drawn from the Elders, land users, community leaders, Indigenous business owners, and nonprofit staff at Black Lake, Fond du Lac, and Hatchet Lake Denesųłiné First Nations in Northern Saskatchewan. For over 40 years, these knowledge holders observed how climate change threatened their communities' traditional practices and the Denesųłiné way of life. They also discussed various adaptive measures that could bolster local economic development. In this paper, we present community perspectives on one specific climate adaptation action: high-latitude tree line afforestation. While community members are concerned that afforestation could harm wildlife (especially barren-ground caribou), be undertaken without local consent and control, and facilitate the spread of invasive species, they also hope that an afforestation project could create jobs, involve youth, support the local economy, and contribute to fighting climate change.

KEYWORDS: afforestation, climate impacts, Northern Saskatchewan, barren-ground caribou, Indigenous economic development

This article is the first in a series exploring the economic and business opportunities for northern Indigenous communities through climate change adaptation and mitigation. Climate change is impacting Northern Saskatchewan (and Canada) more rapidly than the global average, with environmental, cultural, and economic effects (D'Orangeville et al., 2023; Gauthier et al., 2023). Temperatures are rising, wildfires are becoming more frequent, and animal migrations are shifting. These changes influence road and air travel, air quality, hunting and gathering practices, the northern economy, and Indigenous relationships with the land (Clark et al., 2022; Council of Canadian Academies, 2014; Fauchald et al., 2017). Indigenous communities—who make up the majority of Northern Saskatchewan's population (Beatty et al., 2013)—depend on the environment for their food, cultural identity, and more, making them particularly vulnerable to climate impacts (Council of Canadian Academies, 2014).

Across Northern Canada, various strategies are being adopted to address these climate impacts, including developing renewable energy (Natural Resources Canada, 2025), community-led food production (Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami, 2025), and enhanced environmental monitoring (Thompson et al., 2021). Efforts are also being made to improve transportation, strengthen emergency response systems, and support education and training related to climate adaptation (Environment and Climate Change Canada,

2023). In this context, our research team is studying afforestation along the tree line in Northern Canada as a Natural Climate Solution (NCS). Guided by our scientific expertise, we seek to understand not only the potential climate benefits of afforestation but also Indigenous perspectives and the related economic and business opportunities that could arise for Indigenous communities.

Afforestation is the process of planting trees in an area that was not previously forested. The trees capture carbon from the atmosphere and have potential climate benefits related to albedo (i.e., reflectivity of the earth's surface), soil dynamics, and hydrology (Dsouza et al., 2025). While offering potential climate benefits, afforestation also presents risks and unintended consequences depending on how, where, and by whom it is implemented. These risks include increased wildfires and invasive species, loss of soil carbon and biodiversity, and interference with local and Indigenous land use (Kristensen et al., 2024; Moyano et al., 2024). Local knowledge, cultural values, land use practices, and community priorities must be considered to ensure that climate initiatives support local contexts and do not impact Indigenous rights or access to important land-based resources (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, 2022; Simba et al., 2024). Our research recognizes the importance of local and Indigenous perspectives and seeks to better understand how afforestation is viewed at the community level so that approaches are respectful, informed, and responsive to local needs and worldviews.

As researchers contributing a business and economic lens to a predominantly science-focused team—composed of experts in soil science, forestry, and climate systems—we draw on early insights from 11 interviews conducted with Indigenous knowledge holders in Nuhenéné, the traditional territory of the Athabasca Denesųłiné. While deep thematic coding is still underway, early patterns reflect community members' aspirations and concerns. This work is grounded in a commitment to respect and honour Indigenous voices through the application of Indigenous research methodologies and relational accountability (Wilson, 2008). This paper will first discuss local observations of climate change, then share community perspectives on afforestation as a climate solution.

Overview of Study Communities

Black Lake Denesųłiné First Nation, Fond du Lac Denesųłiné First Nation, and Hatchet Lake Denesųłiné First Nation are located in Nuhenéné—the traditional territory of these First Nations—within the Athabasca Basin region of Northern Saskatchewan. The communities are at the southern boundary of the Taiga Shield ecozone, and their traditional territory extends into the Northwest Territories and Nunavut. Each community has 1,000-1,500 residents living on reserve, with four nearby municipalities housing an additional 400 people. The Athabasca Denesųłiné continue to maintain traditional practices such as hunting, fishing, and gathering, which remain central to their food systems, cultural identity, and relationship with the land. Primary sources of protein include barren-ground caribou, fish, and grouse. Food from grocery stores is expensive and generally low in nutritional value. Dene is the first language for 77-95% of the populace, and most also speak English (Statistics Canada, 2025). Winter roads connect the communities seasonally, but air travel remains the primary means of transportation.

Each community has essential services, including a school and a health centre; the only hospital in the region is in Stony Rapids, adjacent to Black Lake.

Nuhenéné is one of the world's most significant sources of high-grade uranium, and as a result, many Athabasca Denesųłiné are employed in the mining sector. The First Nations have developed collaborative relationships with mining and exploration companies: for example, Athabasca Basin Development is an investment corporation established in 2002 to deliver services such as transportation, security, and construction to the mines (Athabasca Basin Development, 2025). Likewise, Ya'thi Néné Lands and Resources coordinates Exploration and Collaboration Agreements with mining and exploration firms and oversees natural resource management in the region (Ya'thi Néné Lands and Resources, n.d.). Finally, each First Nation has a development corporation that generates revenue, creates training opportunities, provides employment for its members, and supports community projects.

Literature Review

Climate Change in Northern Canada

Climate change is increasing temperatures and altering precipitation patterns in Canada's North, posing serious risks to communities and ecosystems. Since 1950, the average temperature in North American boreal forests has increased by 2 degrees, nearly twice the global average (D'Orangeville et al., 2023). Large-scale extreme wildfires are occurring more frequently and changing ecosystem compositions (Phillips et al., 2022). Another impact of climate change is that vegetation is growing faster and spreading into more northerly areas due to increased temperatures, greater access to soil nutrients, higher atmospheric carbon dioxide levels, and shorter winters (Pappas et al., 2023). Plant and animal species are expanding their ranges northward; boreal climate zones are expected to shift five to ten times faster than the natural range expansion achievable by most tree species, potentially leading to species extinction (Price et al., 2013). And certain cultural keystone species, such as barren-ground caribou, are experiencing disrupted migration patterns, changes to food supply, and parasites (Beverly and Qamanirjuaq Caribou Management Board, 2023).

These climate change impacts directly affect people living in the north. Remote locations, high poverty levels, and limited access to health care, transportation, and supplies make northern communities vulnerable to climate impacts. Many communities lack year-round road access and rely on air and water transport, as well as winter roads, to obtain supplies. Winter roads are built from compacted snow and ice during the winter months and facilitate the delivery of supplies, including fuel, construction materials, fire trucks, drinking water, sewage treatment chemicals, and more. These supplies would cost two to three times more if flown into communities, and some materials would be too large or dangerous to fly. Warmer weather delays the opening of winter roads, and warm spells can close roads mid-season (Rutgers, 2024). In 2024, five First Nations across Canada declared States of Emergency, as roads had not opened by February and some communities had less than a week of fuel remaining. This problem will only

become more severe: by 2050, more than half of winter roads are predicted to become unusable, with almost all winter roads unusable by 2080 (Rutgers, 2024).

Locally, changes to plant and animal communities affect food security and are impacting access to healthy, culturally appropriate food in the north (Shafiee et al., 2022). Harvesting food facilitates connection to the land, which in turn supports nutrition, learning, food security, family relationships, mental and spiritual health, and individual and collective well-being. Because of this, limited access to traditional foods is a threat to northern communities (Kendrick, 2013). While the impacts outlined here are already placing immense pressure on these communities, they represent only part of a broader and accelerating climate crisis. These interconnected challenges underscore the urgent need for adaptation and mitigation strategies and for examination of how northerners might respond to rapidly changing ecosystems.

Natural Climate Solutions (NCS)

NCS mitigate climate change using natural means: for example, planting trees, restoring wetlands, and transitioning to regenerative agriculture. Canada has announced support for NCS through the Two Billion Trees Project and the Natural Climate Solutions Fund. These support Canada's goals to conserve 30% of its lands and oceans by 2030 and reach net-zero greenhouse gas emissions by 2050 (Environment and Climate Change Canada, 2024). The remainder of this literature review explores afforestation as an NCS.

Afforestation

Afforestation involves planting trees on land that has not supported trees in recent history, typically the last 50 years (Schirmer & Bull, 2014). Most projects occur on agricultural land, grasslands, degraded areas, or in alpine regions, and they target carbon storage, biodiversity, and local livelihoods.

Afforestation projects at high-latitude tree lines (i.e., in the far north) were not studied until the early 2010s. Scientific interest was sparked by the projection that increased temperatures and atmospheric carbon dioxide, access to additional soil nutrients, and shorter winters could cause above-ground biomass in boreal forests to rise by 13% by 2100 (Larjavaara et al., 2021; Pappas et al., 2023). Researchers drew on technical knowledge from afforestation efforts at mountain tree lines, although with the goal of carbon storage for climate change mitigation rather than avalanche protection (Gibbon et al., 2010; Grätz et al., 2023). However, as more research has been completed, some scientists suggest that net gains in carbon storage via trees could be offset by melting permafrost, loss of soil carbon, decreased albedo, and increased wildfire activity (Dsouza et al., 2025; Hansson et al., 2021; Lemprière et al., 2013). Other members of our research team continue these studies to determine high-latitude afforestation's potential climate impacts.

Furthermore, around the globe, many afforestation projects face criticism for being imposed without community input, and this is a risk for high-latitude afforestation as well. A common critique is that community voices are not heard, and locals feel a

loss of control over their environment (McFetridge & Collins, 2021; Trottier, 2024). Successful projects depend on community engagement, local management, and support like training and economic investment (Ojuok, 2020). Our research acts as a first step to involve communities and understand their views on whether afforestation fits their landscapes and aligns with their values. To our knowledge, this study is the first to explore Indigenous community perspectives on high-latitude afforestation, as previous studies have only focused on scientific and technical aspects. This study is a preliminary report that focuses on early understandings of the local Indigenous communities' attitudes towards afforestation.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative, community-engaged approach rooted in Indigenous research methodologies. Our methodology emphasizes relational accountability, community benefit, and respect for Indigenous ways of knowing (Chilisa, 2012; Wilson, 2008). We are dedicated to ethical research practices that uphold the principles of OCAP®—ownership, control, access, and possession of data—as outlined by the First Nations Information Governance Centre. We also focus on building trust and capacity with local communities. These principles are incorporated into our research agreement with Ya'thi Néné Lands and Resources, a regional nonprofit organization representing the three First Nations communities and four municipalities in Saskatchewan's Athabasca Basin.

Data collection involved semi-structured interviews with individuals from Black Lake, Fond du Lac, and Hatchet Lake Denesųłiné First Nations. We have been honoured to gather stories from 11 knowledge holders: Elders, land users, community leaders, Indigenous business owners, and staff at nonprofit organisations in Nuhenéné. Most storytelling took place in person within participant communities and as coordinated and attended by a local community assistant. Additional interviews and community visits are ongoing.

The results below come from the stories we heard: we intentionally use many quotations. This approach shows our commitment to keeping Athabasca Denesųłiné voices central in how we interpret and present findings. Finally, drafts of this paper were shared with Ya'thi Néné Lands and Resources and other knowledge holders for review and validation before publication.

Results

The following section presents initial findings from our ongoing research on how northern Indigenous communities are experiencing climate change and how they might benefit from economic opportunities related to climate adaptation and mitigation efforts. First, we discuss the Athabasca Denesųłiné understanding that air, water, and land are changing due to climate change and significantly affecting life in Nuhenéné. We then examine community perspectives on afforestation, sharing members' concerns and hopes.

"We Knew It a Long Time Ago": Community Knowledge of Climate Change

"We knew it a long time ago," explained Ray when we asked him about climate change. Ray listed numerous climate impacts ranging from weather changes to when to hunt geese and noted that "things are changing." This sentiment— *Dụhụ ası k'ëch'á*—was repeated throughout our interviews.

The people of the Athabasca Basin are already witnessing the tangible effects of climate change in their homelands. These experiences, rooted in daily life, are deeply informed by traditional knowledge and land-based observation. As Ray shared, "From what I've seen and heard from the Elders, they were the ones who noticed back in the '80s. And slowly, they said, things are changing." This type of intergenerational knowledge transmission provides a framework for understanding climate change, one that existed long before media brought news of a changing climate into the communities. All knowledge keepers we spoke with identified local impacts of climate change, particularly in the northern region of their territory. For some, naming the specific changes was easy, but for others, the changes were intuitive. Rosalie, for example, highlighted the intuitive connection that land users hold with their environment: as a fisherwoman, "When I go out on the lake, I just know." Such observations are not only about what is visible, but also about what is felt—a form of knowledge grounded in lived experience and deep relational understanding of the land and deserving equal respect as scientific monitoring (de Echeverria & Thornton, 2019). In the Dene language, these changes can be organized into air, water, and land.

Dụhụ́ yázı k'ëch'á: the air is changing. Many knowledge holders described changes in temperature and weather. Winter is arriving later, and lake freeze-up has shifted from early November to mid-November. Winter temperatures have become colder, and summer temperatures have become warmer. As Terri-Lynn explains, "Thirty years ago the wood stove was able to heat the whole house, but now you need the wood stove and you need the electric heat and everything now because of the climate change." Climate change has also affected how sunsets look, how weather forms, and how much snowfall is received each year. These changes have led to uncertainty about access to ice roads. Ice roads are vital for delivering fuel, food, and other supplies, and Derek described how "sometimes [the ice road] would be open till May, but last year they shut it down early, like end of March." Rosalie echoed this concern: "There was one year we couldn't transport more than 20,000 pounds" due to poor ice conditions. Ice safety is also an increased concern in the communities. As Rosalie explains, "Back then when the winter sets in, it gets cold and the lake freezes. Everybody's been told please do not go on the lake now." She also shared that community members have passed away because of unsafe ice conditions.

Dụhụ́ tu k'ëch'a: the water is changing. The north is experiencing drought, and community members have noticed its impact on local areas. David explains that "our rain is dying," and has observed sloughs and ponds drying up. He additionally describes a significant drop in Black Lake's water level:

> We're losing humongous, lots of water, we're losing. In Black Lake here, I built that dock. When I built it, I left it about, I think it was about 16 inches above the water when I built it. And now when you look at this dock, it's just sitting mostly on the ground… See how much the water dropped? I would say about 5-6 feet… That's in the short time, within probably about four years. And before that it's been changing.

Fish are affected by changes in the water. Lower water levels and warmer temperatures have altered spawning and migration routes, and fewer fish are spawning. "The taste of the fish is changing, due to all this," says David.

Dụhų́ nih k'ëch'á: the land is changing. Changes in temperature, weather, and water are leading to increased extreme forest fires and altered animal behaviour. Knowledge holders have observed increased wildfires since the mid-1990s in the Northwest Territories and, over the last 15 years, in Northern Saskatchewan. Athabasca Denesųłiné communities have been evacuated numerous times. Traplines have been lost to fire, and, at times, campfires are prohibited. The extreme fires have particularly impacted barren-ground caribou, which are closely tied to Dene culture. Caribou from the Beverly and Qamanirjuaq herds migrate south into Nuhenéné during winter and spring to feed on lichens that grow on the tundra and in mature forests. When the forests burn, we were told, the caribou starve and stop migrating to that area. Ray argued, "It's like burning [caribou] food, starving them so they stay away from us." Climate change also affects caribou's ability to traverse the changing landscape. Derek explains how fluctuating temperatures affect migration:

> For example, last year… they couldn't come down to their winter habitat areas because the snow had to like, you know, deal with the hot weather, the warm weather, you know, up in the north, the mild temperatures, and then in the night, it freezes up and the caribou can't walk on the ice. It hurts their front legs.

Between climate change and disturbance from airplanes, exploration, and mining, barren-ground caribou are less likely to visit Saskatchewan than in the past. "They were moving into our area every year, 1980s or '90s," Freddie, from Black Lake Denesųłiné First Nation, said. "I think '85 is the last time I seen them in the area." Caribou have, however, been observed in northeastern Saskatchewan in recent years. Due to the added distance, hunting trips now require more time, money, and risk. Athabasca Denesųłiné culture relies on caribou for food, hides, and identity, and community members expressed concern over their continued access to caribou. Ray explained, "If there's a big climate change, the caribou and that is going to be further and further and further and it'll be even harder to get. And the lifestyles will have to change with it too. And slowly we'll be losing our identity as Dene people." Ray and five other community members specifically named decreased access to wildlife and its effects on Dene identity as their biggest concern about climate change.

While community members easily recounted the local effects of climate change, few could identify community initiatives addressing these changes without prompting. Additionally, most had not considered that climate change could also present economic opportunities. The following section examines one of these opportunities, afforestation, in more detail.

Community Perspectives on Afforestation

This paper focuses on afforestation, as it was our initial entry to climate-related economic opportunities in the north; future papers will explore other economic opportunities. To elicit conversation about afforestation along the tree line, we explained the natural northward movement of the tree line and the opportunity to accelerate it. This could mitigate climate change, although the climate benefits or disadvantages of afforestation remain unclear. We learned from community members that the natural northward movement of the tree line is not common knowledge or experience. Most community members are not yet noticing increased plant growth or greening of the tundra, partially because northern travel occurs in winter, when vegetation is buried by snow.

Nonetheless, planting trees brought up concerns, the biggest being interference with animals. David expressed concern for the muskox, grizzly bear, polar bear, caribou, and all of Mother Nature. He said, "And all these wildlife live in there and they're born and used to it. And when we start planting trees there, we're growing vegetation, trees and all that, right. And they're going to change their behaviour." Residents were especially concerned about effects on barren-ground caribou migration. "Why would we choose to plant in that area when the caribou migrate in that area?" asked David. Ray added that if tree planting is going to change his culture's hunting ways, he's not going to like it. He says, "I'd rather have it the way it is now because we're not losing anything, the way it is now. We're just gaining by having this caribou coming to us. But if all this grows in, we might be losing it forever." These concerns about caribou and the Dene way of life raise questions about the impacts of natural greening and tree line movement. Given that the landscape will naturally green due to climate change, would it be beneficial for caribou and Dene culture to remove vegetation to keep the landscape as it is? Could removing vegetation also be beneficial for carbon storage, as it helps maintain soil carbon? Perhaps a vegetation-removal approach would better align with local interests and the maintenance of land-based lifestyles.

Another major concern community members raised about afforestation is that tree-planting projects could proceed without First Nations' consent, participation, leadership, and economic benefit. The communities have had negative experiences with outsiders advancing their agendas at the expense of community and ecosystem well-being. For example, tourist camps have relied on local guides to get started, then stopped hiring locals. "They used us and then they left us, kind of thing," said John. At other times, communities only learn about plans for their traditional territory by reading news or journal articles. David discovered research about the feasibility of gas and water pipelines in this way and was dismayed. He worries that if scientists or the government see an opportunity for economic growth, or even climate benefit, planting

will commence, no matter what locals think. “It’s going to be backlash on us at the end regarding this tree planting in the tundra,” he worried.

Having learned from previous negative experiences, communities have been asserting their rights and successfully fending off projects that are not in their best interest. Mining and exploration projects have been rejected, and cleanup of mine tailings is mandatory. “More and more people are beginning to understand that they have a say. Government can’t just come in and do what they’ve done before,” said Rosalie. “If the government wants to really have a way of setting up this project, they also need to consult with the Elders who’ve been there for thousands of years.” This consultation occurs at all levels of planning, from feasibility and baseline studies to project design and completion. During the process, the First Nations advocate for economic benefit, leadership roles, local employment quotas, and local sourcing of catering, transportation, and other needs.

Final concerns about afforestation focused on the types of trees planted and the presence of invasive species. Ricky emphasized the importance of paying attention to invasive species, being cautious about importing vegetation and associated insects and receiving consent and knowledge from community members. He said,

> There’s like that Dutch elm disease and all that, but we don’t have these kinds of trees up in the area here. Maybe different species of, you know, different types of trees may bring different species up here, or insects. But that’s something that needs to be investigated more. What would be safe to grow up in our region? And at the same time, it should be consulted with our members, membership, you know, bringing in something that’s like an import into the north.

If tree planting takes place, scientists must work closely with communities, not just for the physical labour of planting trees but also for integrating local knowledge with Western science, educating locals, and collaborating on which tree species and genotypes to plant.

Assuming issues of wildlife, sovereignty, and ecology were addressed, some community members could imagine benefits in jobs, the economy, youth engagement, and climate mitigation. “There’s money in there… we could affiliate it with the [Black Lake Ventures] business,” said Freddie. Ricky added, “I think it would be a good opportunity for our local people in terms of jobs… and good for the environment.” One knowledge keeper, Billy, had spent two weeks in Ontario planting trees in 2019 and remembers being paid well for the work at $285 per day. He believes a tree-planting program would be a good opportunity for the community, especially for youth: “I did that in Ontario, and this is going to be the first time they see it. How it’s done. And it will be a good opportunity for students. And that way, they could learn the science too.” Planting trees would provide summer jobs for youth and other community members, and the science of tree planting could be integrated into schools. Billy also added that having a job would help youth stay away from drugs and alcohol. All other community members who were asked agreed with Billy that youth would be excited about jobs in

land management. Rosalie reported that youth responded eagerly to the prospect of land management work associated with the North of 60 Agreement:

> The youth, it's unbelievable. They like going out on the land… I see a lot of young people who are out hunting. They're really excited about being on the land. And when I told them about this North of 60 project, you know, one day you're going to go on the land, you're going to manage it, you're going to patrol our land. You could just see it in their face, right? They're all excited about it because it's monitoring our own backyard.

Given the youth's enthusiasm for working with North of 60, a similarly Indigenous-led tree-planting and monitoring program would likely garner interest and participation.

Discussion

The most prominent theme related to climate impacts was how climate change affects wildlife, especially barren-ground caribou. Community members described various climate-related changes that are disrupting wildlife cycles—migration, mating, and behaviour. This disruption does more than affect northerners' diets: it challenges fundamental ways of life and intergenerational teachings. Ray powerfully expressed this connection: "Caribou is like medicine to us." For Athabasca Denesųłiné communities, caribou are vital for food security, cultural identity, and spiritual practices. So far, the communities have taken limited action to address climate impacts, but community members expressed openness and a desire to participate in activities that would benefit both the climate and the northern economy.

Although community members can see benefits from afforestation projects related to jobs, the economy, youth engagement, and climate, they also have concerns about the impacts on wildlife, Indigenous consent and control, and invasive species. We repeatedly heard that a holistic approach to climate mitigation is preferred over individual projects like afforestation. Community members understand the negative effects of extreme wildfires on the climate, ecosystems, and themselves, and they hope that wildfire prevention and firefighting are prioritized as a climate solution. Wildfires are a much higher priority for the community than tree line afforestation, and some community members would be disappointed if afforestation projects proceed without accompanying wildfire mitigation efforts. The climate benefits of afforestation are still uncertain, while other solutions are known to positively impact the climate.

Based on the experiences and insights shared by community members, future climate initiatives in Northern Saskatchewan must be rooted in respect, partnership, and cultural survival. Examples of ongoing colonialism emerged throughout our interviews with community members, highlighting the need for strong relationships and trust-building for successful projects in the north. First and foremost, Indigenous knowledge must be recognized as a valid and crucial form of expertise—on equal footing with Western science—and Indigenous leadership should be central to decision-making. Avoiding top-down approaches is essential; communities must be fully consulted and

empowered to shape climate actions that impact their lands, wildlife, and ways of life. Any initiatives, including afforestation projects, must prioritize the economic well-being of local people by creating jobs and opportunities that reflect local economic goals, values, and stewardship practices.

Furthermore, climate strategies must be directly connected to protecting cultural identity and ensuring survival. Efforts to combat climate change should also safeguard wildlife, such as barren-ground caribou, whose well-being is closely linked to Athabasca Denesųłiné cultural life, and preserve the integrity of northern ecosystems. Additionally, investments are necessary to build local capacity for climate action, providing communities with the tools, training, and resources they need to lead and sustain their own adaptation efforts over the long term. Some community capacity exists through institutions such as Ya'thi Néné Lands and Resources, the Prince Albert Grand Council, and Athabasca Basin Development, but more capacity-building is required. Through these principles—respect, partnership, cultural preservation, and capacity-building—climate action can bolster both environmental resilience and the ongoing strength of Indigenous cultures in Canada's North.

That said, the results of this study should be viewed in the context of the 11 knowledge holders who shared their stories. The findings may not fully represent the Athabasca Denesųłiné population due to the small sample size and the fact that the two nonprofit staff members are not members of the Athabasca Denesųłiné First Nations. Conducting additional interviews would help achieve greater representation of the population. Furthermore, these results are specific to Athabasca Denesųłiné communities. A further limitation is that other First Nations with traditional territory in north-central Saskatchewan experience different climate change impacts, maintain different relationships with barren-ground caribou, are located farther from the tree line, and may hold different perspectives on afforestation. Consequently, the findings of this study may be more relevant to distant communities along the Canadian tree line that depend on barren-ground caribou than to nearby north-central Saskatchewan communities that do not.

Conclusion

The next steps in the project are additional community visits and a deeper analysis of interviews. We will return to Northern Saskatchewan to chat with initial participants, engage with youth, and conduct additional interviews. In the meantime, additional analysis of all 11 interviews will be completed, and we expect to publish future papers about community perspectives on land management, the climate movement in Nuhenéné, the potential for climate mitigation activities to support the rural economy, and how colonialism and land appropriation continue to impact First Nations decision-making.

The voices captured in this research make one thing clear: climate change is not a distant or future concern for northern Indigenous communities. It is already transforming the land, the seasons, the caribou, and by extension, the culture and identity of the Athabasca Denesųłiné people. Afforestation, like many climate strategies, carries

both promise and peril. It may offer a path toward economic participation and climate resilience but only if done in true partnership with Indigenous communities—led by their priorities, informed by their knowledge, and respectful of their lands. As Terri-Lynn reflects, "People are changing with the seasons… events and activities are changing due to the seasons changing." In that transformation lies both loss and possibility—and the need for climate action that is relational, respectful, and rooted in place.

Acknowledgements

This project was funded by a Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council (NSERC) grant. Special thanks to Juleah Duesing-Bird for her help with interviews. This project would not have been possible without those who shared their stories: Billy Adam, Terri-Lynn Beavereye, David Bigeye, Derek Cook, Ray MacDonald, Ricky Robillard, Freddie Throassie, John Toutsaint, and Rosalie Tsannie-Burseth. Finally, thank you to Ya'thi Néné Lands and Resources for supporting this project and facilitating our visit north.

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Securing Futures: The Inuvialuit Regional Corporation and Reindeer Herding History

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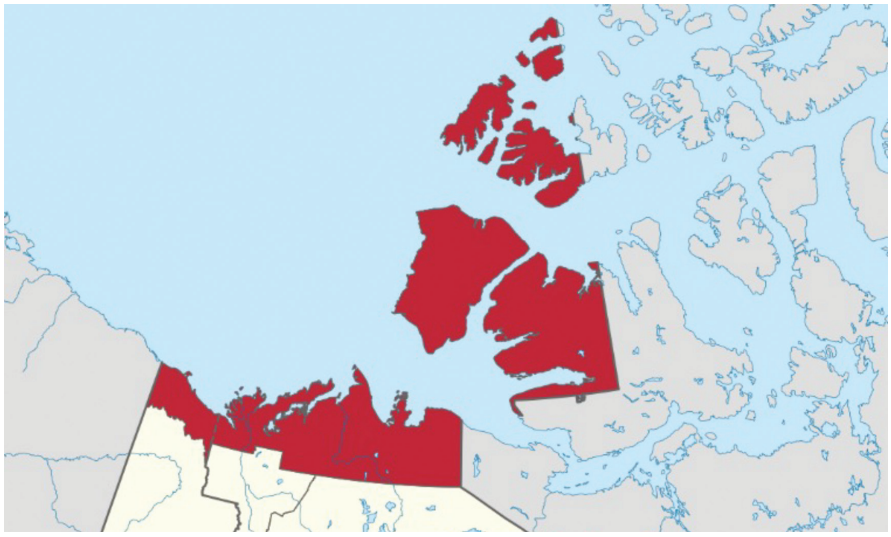
ABSTRACT

This article explores the complex history of reindeer herding in North America and contextualizes its connection to other Arctic Indigenous nations, from the Sámi people to its contemporary management by the Inuvialuit Regional Corporation (IRC). Reindeer herding was initially introduced in North America in the late nineteenth century as a solution to declining caribou populations and this practice evolved over time into its modern context with the IRC. By acquiring Canada's only reindeer herd in 2021 and spearheading initiatives like the Country Food Processing Plant in Inuvik, the IRC is integrating traditional herding practices within a corporate framework to ensure sustainable development, food security, and local job creation, while also highlighting the importance of economic development in Indigenous self-determination. This article provides insight into how the IRC's management of the reindeer herd represents an innovative model of Indigenous economic empowerment, blending culture with strategic economic initiatives to address contemporary challenges. The article contributes to the broader discourse on Indigenous governance, economic sustainability, and the pivotal role of traditional knowledge in shaping future pathways for Indigenous communities in the Arctic and beyond.

KEYWORDS: economic development, reindeer herding, food security

The development of Indigenous corporations through Modern Land Claim Agreements (MLCAs) has greatly enhanced Indigenous sovereignty over the management and decision-making processes of their lands and communities. The establishment of the Inuvialuit Regional Corporation (IRC) following the Inuvialuit Final Agreement exemplifies a significant move towards Indigenous autonomy, self-governance, and improved economic and cultural well-being (Inuvialuit Final Agreement, n.d.; Selle & Wilson, 2022). Being 100% Indigenous-owned and operated, the IRC has a mandate to advance the Inuvialuit's economic, social, and cultural prosperity, managing over $695 million of assets and achieving consistent profit growth (Inuvialuit Regional Corporation [IRC], n.d.). Economic development is at the core of the IRC's operations because it is an essential element of Indigenous autonomy, and the acquisition of Canada's only reindeer herd exemplifies the IRC's commitment to sustainable development, food security (Fillion et al., 2014), and local job creation. Initiatives such as the Country Food Processing Plant in Inuvik further demonstrate the IRC's focus on enhancing local employment and the regional food supply. Ultimately, reindeer herding—crucial to the culture and survival of Arctic Indigenous peoples and introduced to Alaska and the Northwest Territories about a century ago—represents more than a business endeavour for the IRC; it signifies a new phase in Indigenous economic empowerment, marrying traditional knowledge with modern corporate structures. However, this journey towards self-determination and sustainability is complex and involves reconciling the traditions and narratives of Indigenous communities with contemporary economic challenges.

FIGURE 1
Map (c. 2019) of Inuvialuit Settlement Region, Yukon, and NWT



Note. From File:NWT-YT Inuvialuit Settlement Locator.svg [Map], by awmcphee, June 9, 2019, Wikimedia Commons, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:NWT-YT_Inuvialuit_Settlement_Locator.svg

Reindeer Herding: Global Cultural and Economic Significance

FIGURE 2
Grazing Caribou

Note. From File:Barren Ground Caribou Grazing with Autumn Foliage in Background.jpg [Photograph], by E. Bauer & P. Bauer, n.d., Wikimedia Commons, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Barren_ground_caribou_grazing_with_autumn_foliage_in_background.jpg

Contrary to common misconceptions, reindeer and caribou belong to the same species, *Rangifer tarandus,* and exhibit significant genetic and behavioural similarities. The primary distinction between them is their level of domestication: caribou *(Rangifer tarandus granti)* remain wild in North America while reindeer *(Rangifer tarandus tarandus)* are semi-domesticated. The domestication process produced variations in appearance and size: domesticated reindeer tend to be smaller due to selective breeding for tameness (Willis, 2006; Hill, 1968; Colson, Mager, & Hundertmark, 2014; Jackson, 1891). The Indigenous Sámi people, who account for about one-third of the world's reindeer-herding activities, have herded reindeer across northern Norway, Sweden, Finland, and Russia since time immemorial (Ravna, 2013). In the circumpolar North, around 2.5 million semi-domesticated reindeer are managed by approximately 100,000 herders from over 20 Arctic Indigenous groups, including the Nenets, Chukchi, Izhma Komi, Khanty, Mansi, Evenk, Even, and Selkup (Eira et al., 2008; Syroechkovski, 1999). Reindeer herding also extends to Mongolia, China, Greenland, and, more recently, to Alaska and Canada, where it covers over 4 million square kilometres of pastures. Semi-domesticated reindeer were initially introduced to Alaska from the Siberian Chukchi Peninsula and, later, from Sápmi (Lapland), which also marked the introduction of many key herding practices to the region (Vorren, 1994; Fjeld & Muus, 2012; Jackson, 1891).

FIGURE 3
Gabna Sameby Village

Note. From Fichier:Gabna sameby i Nord-Sverige (1).jpg [Photograph], by S. B. Kinsten, June 24, 2009, Wikimedia Commons, https://fr.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fichier:Gabna_sameby_i_Nord-Sverige_(1).jpg

Since then, reindeer herding has become a vital tradition for many North American Arctic Indigenous peoples. It is both an economic activity and a cultural practice, deeply rooted in respect for the natural world and blending traditional knowledge with contemporary corporate frameworks. Moreover, hunting wild reindeer and caribou remains essential for many Arctic Indigenous groups' survival, culture, social structure, and lifestyle (Eira et al., 2008). Guided by the seasonal migration patterns of the herds across the Arctic's vast landscapes, the practice of reindeer herding and hunting embodies a profound respect for nature.

Historical Context of Reindeer Herding in North America

FIGURE 4
Reindeer Herd at Teller, Alaska

Note. From Reindeer Herd at Teller, Alaska [Photograph], by J. J. O'Neill, August 1913, Canadian Museum of History (Control No. 38383), Gatineau, QC.

Introduced to North America in 1892, reindeer herding emerged as a response to declining caribou populations: the critical decrease in caribou, vital to the diets of many communities, led to severe shortages and a looming threat of starvation (Treude, 1968; Finstad, Kielland, & Schneider, 2006; Jackson, 1891). Sheldon Jackson, a missionary and Alaska's General Agent of Education, highlighted the severity of the situation in his 1891 report on the introduction of domestic reindeer to Alaska. He noted that in the winter of 1889, not a single caribou was spotted within a 200-mile radius of Kotzebue Sound, underscoring the dire circumstances.

Reindeer herding was seen as a solution to this problem. To this end, between 1894 and 1904 Jackson obtained $207,500 from the United States Congress to initiate reindeer herding in Alaska, a project aimed at bolstering the local economy and providing a sustainable food source (Jackson, 1905; Fjeld & Muus, 2012). In pursuit of skilled herders, Jackson advertised in Scandinavian-American newspapers in 1893, specifically seeking "Laplanders" (Sámi), who were renowned for their reindeer-herding skills (Báiki, 2001; Jackson, 1891; Willis, 2006; Massey & Carlos, 2019). [1] The Reindeer Project sought to adapt Sámi herding methods to a North American setting, facilitating a cultural and knowledge exchange between Sámi herders and Alaska's Indigenous populations (Fjeld & Muus, 2012; Willis, 2006). However, Jackson also had colonial intentions to shift Indigenous Alaskans from their traditional hunting practices, claiming that reindeer herding would have a "civilizing" effect by promoting private resource ownership and establishing a wage-dependent class (Jackson, 1893). [2]

FIGURE 5
1893 Newspaper Advertisement

MEN WANTED TO TAKE CHARGE OF REINDEER IN ALASKA.

In the introduction of domesticated reindeer into northern Alaska a few men are wanted who have had practical experience in the herding and management of reindeer.

If any reader knows of a Laplander in the United States or Canada who has been brought up to the care of reindeer, and who would like to go to Alaska to take charge of reindeer, please communicate his name and address to Dr. Sheldon Jackson, Bureau of Education, Washington, D. C. Also state condition of health, age, experience with reindeer, and wages asked.

Note. From Report on Introduction of Domestic Reindeer into Alaska, with Maps and Illustrations, by S. Jackson, 1893, Department of the Interior, United States Bureau of Education and US Senate.

In February 1894, Jackson sent William Kjellmann—a Norwegian Kven raised in Arctic Norway's Finnmark region, fluent in Sámi, and with reindeer herding experience—to recruit Sámi herders in Kautokeino, Norway, for the Alaskan project (Figure 5) (Fjeld & Muus, 2012; Vorren, 1994). Despite his experience, Kjellmann faced reluctance from the herders, who were hesitant to leave their homeland (Jackson, 1891). To negotiate, he arranged a meeting in Bosekop, a well-known Sámi trading spot. There, Kjellmann's presentation was met with silence from the herders, who took their time considering the offer but initially made no commitments (Jackson, 1896). The discussions stretched over four days, filled with questions from the Sámi, yet concluded without resolution, with the herders leaving for their summer pastures on the fifth day. Two weeks later, the Sámi finally sent a man back to Bosekop to deliver their decision (Jackson, 1896). [3] Ultimately, seven herding families, totalling 16 people along with their dogs, signed on for a three-year term (Jackson, 1899; Báiki, 2001; Willis, 2006).

FIGURE 6
Sámi Family in Front of a Lavvu (Traditional Sámi Tent)

Note. From Eighth Annual Report on Introduction of Domestic Reindeer into Alaska, with Map and Illustrations, 1898, by S. Jackson, 1898, Department of the Interior, United States Bureau of Education.

In May 1894, the group set sail for New York. The dogs' importation necessitated extensive paperwork at Ellis Island due to the absence of breeding station certificates (Jackson, 1896), as they were Sámi herding dogs from the mountains (specifically, Lapland reindeer spitz). The group's journey by rail to Seattle was marked by several incidents: one dog died, another was stolen (and recovered), and they experienced racism when a Northern Pacific Railroad agent in Helena refused to provide food. Additionally, a young Sámi couple had postponed their wedding due to Jackson's short timeline, so they married during a stop in San Francisco. Despite these challenges, the group reached the Teller Reindeer Station on July 29, 1894 (Jackson, 1896).

FIGURE 7
Group of Lapland (Sámi) Herders Standing Near a Passenger Train

Note. From Group of Lapland (Sami) herders standing near a passenger train, Lapland-Yukon Relief Expedition, 1898 [Photograph], by A.B. Wilse, 1898, Seattle Photograph Collection, University of Washington, (Order No. 2665), Seattle, WA.

Upon arriving in Alaska, the Sámi began training Inuvialuit herding apprentices, many of whom were teenagers orphaned by the Great Death. The apprentices were offered food, lodging, and an annual allocation of five to ten reindeer for each year of their five-year apprenticeship—although they were initially skeptical about the promise of receiving their own reindeer (Fjeld & Muus, 2012). Most could also expect to receive 50 reindeer on loan to establish their own herd by the end of their apprenticeship (Massey & Carlos, 2019). In contrast, Sámi herders were assured ownership of a herd of 100 reindeer upon completing their three- to five-year contracts (Jackson, 1896), with full autonomy over herd management, including the rights to slaughter and sell (Massey & Carlos, 2019).

FIGURE 8
An Inuvialuit Herder and Reindeer

Note. From [Man with Reindeer] [Photograph], by A. Fleming, c. 1930, NWT Archives (N-1979-050-0305), Yellowknife, YT.

In 1897, under orders from the United States government, Jackson brought additional Sámi and reindeer to establish a permanent Sámi settlement in Alaska (Jackson, 1899). This endeavour involved purchasing 539 reindeer, 418 sleds, and 500 tons of moss from regions across Sápmi, including Kautokeino, Karasjok, and Enare (Jackson, 1899; Fjeld & Muus, 2012). Jackson documented the significant challenge of persuading individuals, deeply rooted in their ancestral lands, to uproot their lives and embark on a 12,500-mile journey to Alaska on two weeks' notice (Jackson, 1899)—but his efforts paid off, and in 1898, 113 Sámi men, women, and children (including babies and six newlywed couples) embarked for North America aboard the Manitoban (Jackson, 1899; Fjeld & Muus, 2012).

FIGURE 9
Families Associated with the Lapland Reindeer Expedition in Seattle en Route to Alaska

Note. From Eighth Annual Report on Introduction of Domestic Reindeer into Alaska, with Map and Illustrations, 1898, by S. Jackson, 1898, Department of the Interior, United States Bureau of Education.

They arrived in Jersey City with only one casualty among the reindeer (Vorren, 1994; Jackson, 1896). The Sámi loaded the remaining reindeer onto trains at the Pennsylvania Railroad cattle yards and set off to Seattle. Upon arriving in Seattle, they were informed of a 10-day delay in their ship departure, resulting in a shortage of lichen (the reindeer's primary food source). They were taken to Woodland Park Zoo, but the unfamiliar forage proved harmful, leading to several reindeer deaths (Fjeld & Muus, 2012; Vorren, 1994). Then, in the subsequent voyage to Alaska on the sailing vessel *Seminole,* their trip was further delayed by a lack of wind, exacerbating the reindeer's starvation (Vorren, 1994). The situation worsened as the reindeer, fed only hay for several weeks, suffered from stress and dietary changes, leading to severe health issues (Conaty & Binder, 2004). Upon arrival at their destination, only 144 of the original 526 reindeer survived (Jackson, 1896).

FIGURE 10
Reindeer and Sámi at Woodland Park in Seattle en Route to Alaska

Note. From Reindeer and Sámi at Woodland Park, 1898 [Photographic print mounted on cardboard], by E. S. Curtis, 1898, Seattle Historical Society Collection, Museum of History & Industry (Image No. shs2899), Seattle, WA.

Initially, there was wariness between the Sámi and the Inuit, and differences in government compensation also caused some Inuit to be upset. For example, Inuvialuit owners were subjected to restrictions such as prohibitions on slaughtering and selling female reindeer to non-Natives (Massey & Carlos, 2019). Moreover, Jackson controlled the involvement of the Sámi, Yup'ik, and Inupiaq in the Reindeer Project, effectively reducing them to "auxiliaries of the white man" (Fjeld & Muus, 2012, p. 7). By 1896, Jackson modified the program, removing the incentive of reindeer compensation and establishing that upon an Inupiat owner's death, half of the herd would be returned to the mission rather than inherited by the owner's heirs (Vorren, 1994).

FIGURE 11
Reindeer en Route to the Klondike, Yukon Territory

Note. From Reindeer en route to the Klondike, Yukon Territory, probably 1898 [Photograph], by E. A. Hegg, ca. 1898, University of Washington Libraries, Special Collections (Order no. HEG456), Seattle, WA.

Despite this, the Inuit and Sámi built mutual respect as they worked together in reindeer herding. Over time, the Inupiat recognized a kinship with the Sámi, rooted in a shared Indigenous worldview, reverence for nature, and striking parallels in their traditional ways of life (Vorren, 1994). These similarities were so profound that the cultures and lifestyles of the Sámi and Inupiat were almost indistinguishable (Nyborg, 2010). In letters the Sámi sent back to family members, they said, "There are many Eskimos here, and they are good people. They eat seal and fish and earn their living hunting and fishing. They live amid the white people the same way the Sámi of Finnmark live with Norwegians" (Solbakk & Solbakk, 2014, p. 48). The two communities became increasingly intertwined through marriage, causing clear lines between the two to fade (Willis, 2006). [4]

FIGURE 12
Families of Herders Watching Men Round Up Reindeer While Sitting in Front of a Summer Tent

Note. From Families of Herders Sit in Front of a Tent, Watching Men Round Up. Reindeer Depot, Mackenzie Delta [Photograph], by D. Wilkinson, 1955, Nunavut Archives (NU-1979-051-1130).

Over time, Jackson's heavy-handed management practices came under scrutiny. In 1905, the Secretary of the Interior investigated accusations regarding Jackson's misallocation of government funds for missionary purposes, as well as his policies on reindeer ownership among the mission, non-Native, and Inupiaq populations. The investigation culminated in Jackson's resignation and a focused effort to transfer as much reindeer ownership as possible to the Inupiaq (Finstad, et al., 2006).

FIGURE 13
Sámi Man Watching Reindeer Herd, Alaska

Note. From Man (Possibly a Sami from Norway) Watching Reindeer Herd, Alaska, 1897 [Photograph], 1897, Ralph E. MacKay Alaska Photograph Albums, University of Washington Libraries, Special Collections (Order No. AWC6741), Seattle, WA.

In the end, over 600 Inupiaq and Yup'ik apprenticed in various aspects of reindeer herding, including milking, marking, and butchering (Vorren, 1994). By 1905, Alaska's reindeer population had reached approximately 10,000, predominantly owned by the Sámi; in 1910, there were over 27,000, with 19% of the total reindeer herd owned by just six families (Vorren, 1989; Báiki, 2001); and in 1920, the herds had grown to 600,000 reindeer, providing vital resources such as food and clothing. They even became pack animals for miners, pulling heavy loads and delivering mail and provisions across Alaska, the Yukon River, and British Columbia (Vorren, 1994; Fjeld & Muus, 2012; Conaty & Binder, 2004). This marked a significant advancement in establishing reindeer herding as a viable industry in the region because, for example, reindeer could run a route in four to five days that would take a dog team 50-60 days (Vorren, 1994), demonstrating the resilience and adaptability of the involved communities (Vorren, 1994; Fjeld & Muus, 2012; Conaty & Binder, 2004). This growth marked a significant evolution in the reindeer herding industry, showcasing its vital role in the region's economic and cultural landscape and establishing it as a foundational cornerstone of the Canadian Arctic's economy and culture.

Reindeer Industry Act

The success of the Reindeer Project did not go unnoticed, with non-Native reindeer ownership notably increasing in 1914 and leading to a surge in the reindeer population: by 1915 there were approximately 70,000-100,000 reindeer split between 98 herds. Sixty-nine percent of these reindeer were owned by 1,200 Inuit and Yup'ik individuals, while the remaining reindeer were held by a mix of Sámi, the US Government, various missions, and the Lomen Company (Báiki, 2001). Indeed, by 1929, the Lomen Company had acquired 14,083 reindeer and established a substantial commercial export operation. They purchased many reindeer from the Sámi, and also employed some Sámi as herders, expanding their operations to include slaughterhouses and two cold storage ships for transporting meat to the southern markets (Vorren, 1994).

FIGURE 14
Lomen Brothers Reindeer Meat Ad

Note. From Lomen Brothers Reindeer Meat Ad, c.1920, Glenbow Museum, Calgary, AB.

Carl Lomen, the company's owner, was a relentless promoter and lobbied investors, politicians, and Congress for financial support, as well as issuing shares on the stock exchange (Fawcett, 2022; Vorren, 1994). He argued that the reindeer industry could preserve wild game for hunters and gourmet enthusiasts, rehabilitate unused lands (e.g., tundra), and address the country's meat shortages—a position illustrated when the Nome Gold Rush caused the price of reindeer meat to double due to an increased demand for meat (Lantis, 1950). Lomen also hosted dinner parties featuring reindeer meat for elite clubs, highlighted its commercial potential on the lecture circuit, persuaded high-end restaurants to add reindeer meat to their menus, and arranged for reindeer meat to be served in dining car trains (Willis, 2006; Fawcett, 2022), noting that "reindeer meat is as good as, if not better than, other types of venison and serves as an excellent alternative to beef and mutton" (Lomen, 1920, p. X). He even pitched reindeer meat to pet food manufacturers (Fawcett, 2022). But Lomen's most extravagant marketing scheme began in 1926, involving department stores like Macy's. That Christmas, he sent live, harness-trained reindeer to various retail locations, where they paraded as "Santa's reindeer" led by Inuit or Sámi herders and cemented the cultural image of Santa and his reindeer (Smith, 2021; Fawcett, 2022). Lomen's efforts paid off, and by 1929, Americans had purchased nearly 6.5 million pounds of reindeer products, mostly meat from Lomen's.

FIGURE 15
Lomen & Company Sent Reindeer and a Santa Claus to Nome

Note. From The Rise and Fall of Alaska's 'Reindeer King,' by K. Fawcett, December 23, 2022, Atlas Obscura, https://www.atlasobscura.com/articles/alaska-reindeer

However, that year's stock market crash, along with opposition from the beef industry, significantly impacted sales (Fawcett, 2022). Compounding the issue, the best markets for luxury meats were in far-away New York, and some states prohibited the sale

of reindeer meat by classifying it as game meat. Restrictive measures and preferences for beef over reindeer meat further hindered steady market development (Lantis, 1950). Lomen also faced local resistance: the Inuit accused Lomen of monopolistic practices, reindeer theft, and grazing his herds on Indigenous-designated lands, leading to years of disputes and hearings (Conaty & Binder, 2004; Fawcett, 2022). Due to these myriad factors, the reindeer industry, which had already been struggling due to the Depression, collapsed, decreasing its production from over 700,000 pounds of reindeer meat annually to just a few thousand (Bown, 2014).

Despite its collapse, Lomen's company still had a significant impact on the reindeer industry: prompted partly by the dominance of the Lomen Brothers' white-owned reindeer enterprise and partly by Indigenous dissatisfaction and political activism in the 1920s and early 1930s, the Reindeer Act was passed by the United States Congress on September 1, 1937. [5] This crucial law significantly altered the industry by restricting reindeer ownership in Alaska to "Alaskan Natives" and transferred oversight of the reindeer program to the Alaska Division of the Office of Indian Affairs (Báiki, 2001; Hanson, 1952). This move aimed to consolidate all non-Native-owned reindeer and their equipment under government ownership (Willis, 2006) and resulted in the federal government's $500,000 purchase of the Lomen reindeer business (Massey & Carlos, 2019; Fawcett, 2022).

While the Reindeer Act aimed to enhance food security and income for Indigenous Alaskans, its success varied. Despite evidence suggesting that herding was linked to reduced indebtedness, the Act did not boost income for Indigenous Alaskan households as intended: ultimately, herding communities showed lower income and assets (Massey & Carlos, 2019). The program's rules, including the ban on sales to non-Natives and the requirement for active slaughtering, limited Indigenous households' ability to capitalize on market opportunities and adversely affected Inuit households' financial opportunities (Massey & Carlos, 2019).

The Reindeer Act's Effect on the Sámi

The Reindeer Act also significantly impacted the Sámi. Unexpected political debates regarding white ownership reclassified them as non-Native, requiring them to relinquish their herds to the government for $3-4 per animal (Willis, 2006). [6] Many Sámi felt disillusioned with the system that had initially lured them to Alaska, 4with some herders returning to Sápmi, while others pursued gold mining or fur farming opportunities (Vorren, 1994). Still others joined the gold rush or settled near Seattle in Poulsbo (Jensen, 2012; Vorren, 1994). Anders Bær poignantly described the situation: "We didn't wish to give up our animals... After the animals were gone, we just remained in the village. Our people started getting old. My father said he wished to die here because this was his home" (Nyborg, 2010, p. X). However, there was one important exception to the Sámi's disenfranchisement: Sámi individuals who had married into "Alaskan Native" (e.g., Inupiat, Yup'ik) families were allowed to continue herding, creating a significant exception to the broad legislative changes (Nyborg, 2010).

Canadian Reindeer Project

During the time that the Reindeer Act was being put into place, the Canadian government had started seeking remedies for their own caribou shortage and its impact on the Inuvialuit, who relied heavily on caribou for sustenance and winter clothing (Conaty & Binder, 2004). Government reports from 1922 and 1928 recommended reindeer herding as a viable solution, highlighting the Mackenzie River Delta as an ideal location. These studies suggested that the northeastern part of the region could support over half a million reindeer (Vorren, 1994; Conaty & Binder, 2004). This approach sought to address both the decline in caribou populations and the social challenges posed by government relocation of Inuit to areas near trading posts and RCMP outposts, which had disrupted their traditional lifestyle (Conaty & Binder, 2004). The Lomen brothers facilitated the Canadian government's plan by selling them 3,515 reindeer intended for delivery to Kittigazuit, Northwest Territories (Vorren, 1994; Conaty & Binder, 2004).

FIGURE 16
Laplander (Sámi) Andrew Bær Poses with Two Reindeer

Note. From Laplander Andrew Bahr (Bær) Poses with Two Reindeer (in Full Winter Attire and at His Side at a Reindeer Fair Held in January 1915 at Igloo, Alaska [Photograph], 1915, Glenbow Museum (NC-1-547D), Calgary, AB.

Labrador

The Canadian Reindeer Project in the Northwest Territories was not an isolated initiative but built upon earlier reindeer projects in Canada. Wilfred Grenfell, a doctor in Newfoundland, initiated Canada's first reindeer herding project. He was convinced that Newfoundland and Labrador's vast moss-covered lands would be as suitable for domestic reindeer as they were for wild caribou (Privy Council Office, 1919). Grenfell

consulted with Sheldon Jackson in the United States, then raised funds and urged the Canadian government to bring three Sámi families and 300 reindeer to St. Anthony, Newfoundland in 1908: within five years, the herd grew to approximately 1,500 (Smith, 2021). [7] Grenfell's early success demonstrated the potential for reindeer herding in Canada.

However, as time went on, the project faced several challenges. Grenfell's absence during World War I, disease outbreaks among the reindeer, local resistance from Newfoundlanders, animal poaching, and the Sámi herders' departure all contributed to its decline. By 1917, only about 250 reindeer remained. These remaining animals were transferred to Rocky Bay on the north shore of the Gulf of St. Lawrence and later to Anticosti Island. However, there was a silver lining to the project's failure: it (a) proved that reindeer could be successfully herded in Canada without undue cost, as the animals ate natural food sources, and (b) demonstrated that reindeer could be effective means of transport. [8] In light of this, Grenfell remained convinced of his project's feasibility (Smith, 2021). In two letters from 1921, Grenfell advocated for continued reindeer herding in Newfoundland and Labrador, underscoring the overcrowding of reindeer grounds in Sweden and Norway and the willingness of Sámi herders to relocate to Canada with their herds (Privy Council Office, 1919).

FIGURE 17
Unnamed Man with Two Laplanders (Sámi), Amadjuak, Baffin Island

Note. From Nomad Lives, by A. Averbouh, N. Goutas, & S. Méry (Eds.), 2021, Publications Scientifiques du Muséum.

Baffin Island

Building upon the Labrador project, Canada's second reindeer project, sometimes called the Amadjuak experiment, expanded efforts to Baffin Island in the early 1920s, where the Hudson's Bay Company created the Hudson's Bay Reindeer Company to establish a commercial herd (Privy Council Office, 1919). In 1920, Vilhjalmur Stefansson was granted an exclusive grazing lease on Baffin Island and appointed as the new company's director (Privy Council Office, 1919; Smith, 2021). In May 1921, the Hudson's Bay Company sent Francis Wood and Captain J.A. Mikkelborg to Norway on the HBC ship Nascopie to purchase 689 reindeer and pick up Sámi herders and their families. They arrived on November 1, 1921, in Amadjuak (Laugrand, 2021).

The plan was for the Sámi to teach the Inuit about reindeer herding (Laugrand, 2021). The Sámi herders developed a friendly relationship with the Inuit, who were intrigued by their similar worldview and clothing and who saw the reindeer herders as "cousins" (Laugrand, 2021, p. X). However, the Sámi herders struggled to manage the herd due to the difficult terrain and weakened animals. One strategy involved dividing the herd into smaller groups to prevent starvation, but approximately 250 reindeer escaped and mixed with the wild caribou herds (Laugrand, 2021). Despite these difficulties, this project did lay the groundwork for future reindeer herding initiatives—particularly the Canadian Reindeer Project in the Northwest Territories.

Northwest Territories

FIGURE 18
Canadian Reindeer Project

Note. From The Great Canadian Reindeer Project, by S.R. Brown, 2014, Canada's History, https://www.canadashistory.ca/explore/environment/the-great-canadian-reindeer-project

The Canadian government's early interest in reindeer herding emerged during a period of instability in northern subsistence economies, when declining fox populations and volatile fur prices after the First World War (1918-20) raised concerns about the long-term viability of the fur trade (Canada. Royal Commission 1922). In the winter of 1919-1920, members of the Royal Commission on Musk-Ox and Reindeer met in Ottawa to evaluate reindeer husbandry as a potential source of stable food supply and income in the Northwest Territories, identifying extensive regions of the western Arctic as suitable grazing lands. Their discussions also reflected the influence of the Alaskan reindeer industry, which U.S. officials had promoted since the 1890s as a more dependable alternative to boom-and-bust resource economies. Oral histories noted that an Inuvialuit man named Mangilaluk negotiated on behalf of local communities with the government, offering a potential agreement with the government if reindeer were brought from Alaska to the Tuktoyaktuk area (Stuhl, 2022).A few years later, Danish-born botanist Alf Erling Porsild and his brother Robert were appointed to conduct a detailed investigation on whether reindeer herding was feasible in Canada. They spent two years examining the area between the Alaska-Yukon boundary and Coronation Gulf, covering 15,000 miles by dog team, canoe, motorboat, pack dogs, and snowshoe. They concluded that the region was well-suited for reindeer herding, particularly those areas east of the Mackenzie Delta and north and east of Great Bear Lake (Smith, 2021). Meanwhile, none other than Carl Lomen travelled to Seattle to connect with Sámi individuals who had sold their reindeer herds and moved south: Lomen's goal was to recruit additional herders to join the Sámi previously recruited by the Canadian Government (Báiki, 2001; Conaty & Binder, 2004). Anders Bær, a lead herder for Lomen, offered to move the reindeer and selected Mikkel Nilukka to assist in this endeavour. The ambitious journey commenced in 1929, with a projected two year, 2,000-kilometer trek over mountains and vast tundra. However, the reindeer and their herders did not reach Kittigazuit until 1933, highlighting the challenging terrains and Bær's persistence in recovering reindeer that had joined with the wild caribou herds (Vorren, 1994; Conaty & Binder, 2004).

FIGURE 19
Inuvialuit Herders in Corral with Reindeer During Annual Roundup

Note. From Inuvialuit Herders in Reindeer Corral with Reindeer During Annual Roundup (Richards Island, Northwest Territories) [Photograph], 1928-37, Canadian Archives (R216-1093-5-E.

The Canadian government prepared for the herders' arrival by officially designating a tract of land east of the Mackenzie Delta as the Reindeer Grazing Reserve (Smith, 2021). And Erling Porsild stayed on to oversee the construction of the new town of Reindeer Station and a reindeer corral near Kittigazuit. The operation's success was signalled by the birth of 815 calves upon the reindeer's arrival (Báiki, 2001; Hill, 1968). However, reindeer herding was not met with universal enthusiasm. While the Canadian government anticipated that the Inuvialuit of the Delta would eagerly adopt reindeer herding—and, hopefully, transition away from relying on caribou and towards a pastoral lifestyle—their reactions ranged from indifference to disdain. The Inuvialuit were not among the Arctic peoples that herded reindeer: they were hunters, gatherers, fishers, and trappers, and their year revolved around the optimal times for different foods. Most Inuit were unwilling to exchange their traditional lifestyle (Laugrand, 2021), particularly in the Mackenzie Delta, which boasts a richness of animal species (Treude, 1979). The Inuvialuit's cultural preference for hunting is deeply rooted, with one Inuit hunter, Pauloosie Kilabuk, explaining, "We Inuit want to kill animals, not to live with them" (Laugrand, 2021). Reindeer herding required a significant shift in lifestyle, involving wintering in the hills, guiding reindeer across ice and tundra to

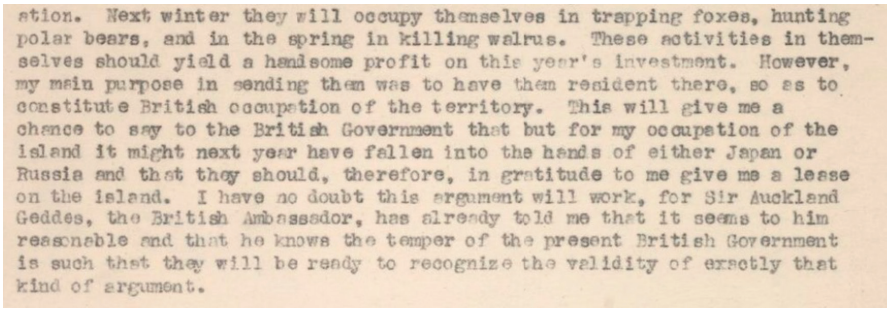
the calving grounds, and staying with the herd at night for warmth and protection. Even if some Inuvialuit were interested in herding, pursuing it risked alienation from their community (Edwards, 2016). Another challenge to the Reindeer Project was the government's decision to make hunting illegal on the Reindeer Grazing Reserve's 17,000 square kilometres (which eventually expanded to over 46,000 square kilometers) (Treude, 1979). And the slaughtering of reindeer was highly regulated, preventing the Inuvialuit from sharing meat.

Moreover, there is evidence that a government agenda to establish sovereignty over the Arctic partly drove the relocation of Inuit into permanent settlements. [9] These projects were, to some extent, a manifestation of the desire to occupy and utilize these regions (Smith, 2021). Evidence of this governmental agenda is seen in Vilhjalmur Stefansson's correspondence. In a letter dated August 30, 1921, Stefansson stated,

My main purpose in sending them was to have them resident there, so as to constitute British occupation of the territory. This will give me a chance to say to the British Government that but for my occupation of the island it might next year have fallen into the hands of either Japan or Russia and that they should, therefore, in gratitude to me give me a lease on the island.

This explicit admission highlights how reindeer herding projects were used strategically to assert sovereignty over the Arctic.

FIGURE 20
Excerpt from Vilhjalmur Stefansson's Letter to George Jennings



ation. Next winter they will occupy themselves in trapping foxes, hunting polar bears, and in the spring in killing walrus. These activities in themselves should yield a handsome profit on this year's investment. However, my main purpose in sending them was to have them resident there, so as to constitute British occupation of the territory. This will give me a chance to say to the British Government that but for my occupation of the island it might next year have fallen into the hands of either Japan or Russia and that they should, therefore, in gratitude to me give me a lease on the island. I have no doubt this argument will work, for Sir Auckland Geddes, the British Ambassador, has already told me that it seems to him reasonable and that he knows the temper of the present British Government is such that they will be ready to recognize the validity of exactly that kind of argument.

Note. From Letter from Vilhjalmur Stefansson to George Jennings, 30 August 1921, by V. Stefansson, 1921, Rauner Special Collections Library, Dartmouth College (Stefansson Mss-98, Box 9, Folder 6), Hanover, NH.

However, despite the Inuvialuit's wariness, the Mackenzie reindeer operation eventually became a model of efficiency and sustainability, revolutionizing reindeer herding with open herding techniques and unified management. This development provided a reliable food source and income and played a significant role in cultural

enrichment for the local communities (Finstad, Kielland, & Schneider, 2006; |Hill, 1968).

But significant changes were on the horizon. In 1959, management of the Canadian Reindeer Project was handed over to the Canadian Wildlife Service, signalling a pivotal change in its administration (Library and Archives Canada 2015, Báiki, 2001), and in 1973, the Canadian federal government embarked on a new initiative in Indigenous relations, pledging to negotiate comprehensive land claims agreements with Indigenous groups that had not yet signed treaties (Wilson & Alcantara, 2012). The following year marked a significant step towards Indigenous ownership as Inuit entrepreneurs acquired Canadian Reindeer Limited (Báiki, 2001), although there were also setbacks along the way: for example, the Inuit Tapirisat's 1976 land claim did not reach a successful resolution (Wilson & Alcantara, 2012). Ultimately, though, the foundation was laid for a locally managed reindeer herding industry in Canada, leading to the involvement of the IRC and the continuation of the Mackenzie Delta herd's legacy.

The Inuvialuit Final Agreement

This movement towards Indigenous land rights and a locally managed reindeer herding industry continued to gained momentum, and in 1984 the Inuvialuit presented their claim, culminating in the negotiation of the Inuvialuit Final Agreement. This historic agreement endowed the Inuvialuit with extensive rights and resources: a settlement area spanning 435,000 square kilometres, ownership of 91,000 square kilometres, mineral rights over 13,000 square kilometres, and a substantial cash settlement of $152 million (Crown-Indigenous Relations and Northern Affairs Canada, 2016). It also included additional economic and social development funds, rights to harvest wildlife across the settlement area, and significant authority over managing the region's economy, environment, and social programs. Notably, the treaty affirmed the Inuvialuit's entitlement to self-government powers on par with other Indigenous groups in the Northwest Territories (Wilson & Alcantara, 2012).

After the Inuvialuit Final Agreement was finalized in 1984, Canadian Reindeer Ltd. mistakenly believed their pre-existing contract would supersede the new settlement. This misinterpretation led to them not securing specific grazing rights with the Inuvialuit. The IRC insisted on grazing fees from Canadian Reindeer Ltd. for land use within the Inuvialuit Settlement Region, an expectation Canadian Reindeer Ltd. challenged. The ensuing legal battle resulted in a deadlock, stalling progress on the matter for years (Conaty & Binder, 2003). Around 1996, Nellie Cournoyea of the IRC and William Nasigaluak of Canadian Reindeer Ltd. approached local Inuk-Sámi Lloyd Binder with a proposition to form a new company aimed at acquiring the reindeer, thereby resolving a longstanding dispute. This led to the start of the Kunnek Resource Development Corporation. Several primary shareholders were members of the Binder-Kunik families, marking it as a predominantly Inuvialuit-operated venture (Conaty & Binder, 2012). By 1997, Inuk Otto Binder and his son Lloyd successfully purchased the herd, making Otto the first Inuvialuit to own and herd reindeer.

The family was uniquely positioned for success. Lloyd leveraged his experience from his time as a senior manager for the Government of the Northwest Territories' Department of Economic Development and Tourism, as well as from his time as the general manager of Canadian Reindeer Ltd. (Conaty & Binder, 2012). Otto had many years of first-hand herding experience (Conaty & Binder, 2004), and Otto's wife Ellen Pulk was descended from the Finnish Sámi hired by the Canadian government to bring reindeer to the Northwest Territories, directly linking the family's heritage to the origins of reindeer herding in the region (Conaty & Binder, 2004; Vorren, 1994). [10]

FIGURE 21
Ellen Pulk-Binder at Reindeer Station

Note. From [A woman dressed in fur parka uses a rope leash to lead two reindeer] [Photograph], by the Kirk family, 1946, NWT Archives (Kirk Family Fonds, N-2005-001: 0115), Yellowknife, NT.

Over the following two years, a comprehensive economic feasibility and business plan was developed (Conaty & Binder, 2012). This process included an environmental impact screening for the Inuvialuit Environmental Impact Screening Committee, established in 1982 as part of the Western Arctic Claim. This screening was significantly more complex than the previous one-page form from the Canadian Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development, which had been considered sufficient for addressing concerns related to oil and gas projects (Conaty & Binder, 2012). In contrast, the new screening involved producing a 10,000-page report, complete with meetings, consultations, reviews, and detailed studies of impact statements. Completing the impact screening process took a year, at which point it underwent a full review by the Environmental Impact Review Board, a process spanning two years and costing between $50,000 and $75,000 (Conaty & Binder, 2012).

Complicating matters, the reindeer herding initiative fell under the jurisdiction of four governments and numerous agencies, with a review process primarily designed for oil and gas projects, not agriculture (Conaty & Binder, 2012). Moreover, the regulations were being applied to an existing enterprise with reindeer present in Canada for half a century. The requirement to continuously consult and report to various government entities—including federal, territorial, and Inuvialuit representatives within the Inuvialuit Settlement Region Co-management system [11] —does ensure all regional development is monitored, but it comes with great time and cost for the reindeer herders. Reporting obligations cover industry movements, interactions with wildlife, and herd sizes (which influence grazing fees). There were also new costs: for example, shooting a grizzly bear that threatened the herd incurred a $10,000 trophy fee. As well, the project was limited to harvesting antler velvet for the Far Eastern market and small amounts of meat for local sustenance, as exporting meat would necessitate further infrastructure and an additional rigorous review process (Conaty & Binder, 2012). The project also faced significant restrictions from the Canadian government in the form of prohibitions against moving herds to new areas (such as the coast during summer for bug relief), leading to the death of some animals (Conaty & Binder, 2012). The fluctuating demand for reindeer meat, which is often influenced by the availability of hunted caribou meat, also needed to be taken into account (Pope, 2015), as did the relatively small returns generated by herds, the lack of reliable marketing systems, and the necessity of meeting village meat needs, which can slow desired herd growth (Naylor et al., 1980).

The Reindeer Market

Research in the economics and marketing of reindeer is a relatively recent development (Alm, 2007) but can helpfully be applied to the issues facing the Mackenzie Delta herd. Regulatory and legal conflicts have historically increased harvesting costs and reduced profitability for the Mackenzie Delta herd. The Northwest Territories is one of the few jurisdictions with specific reindeer regulations, requiring permits for export and restricting grazing and meat sales without approved marketing plans (Reindeer Act, 2014). These regulations create additional hurdles for market expansion and operational efficiency. As a result, when compared to other similar enterprises—such as Kivalliq Arctic Foods, which operates a commercial caribou hunting operation that processes and ships meat to markets in Quebec, Ontario, and internationally, and Hillside Palace Elk Farms, which sells high-end reindeer steaks and cuts locally in Quebec (Humphries, 2007)—the Mackenzie Delta reindeer herd faces increased challenges due to regulatory and legal conflicts, which then increase harvesting costs and reduce profitability. This difference in business models highlights the importance of local market access and the impact of transportation costs on profitability.

Indeed, the commercial export of reindeer meat has a complicated history. As previously discussed, in the early 20th century, the Lomen Company shipped significant quantities of reindeer meat to southern markets: for example, they shipped 2 million pounds in 1929 (Brady, 1968). However, competition from the beef industry and the stock market crash in 1929 led to the industry's decline, culminating in the 1937 Reindeer Act

that restricted ownership to native Alaskans (Nixon, 1983). Modern reindeer herding faces similar market challenges, such as the high cost of shipping meat to viable markets (such as high-end restaurants in New York), and new challenges such as the expense of maintaining technology essential for herding operations (Jernsletten & Klokov, 2002). Technologies like snowmobiles, helicopters, and satellite tracking tags are costly but necessary for efficient herd management. These expenses, coupled with high fuel costs, can limit the profitability of reindeer herding, particularly for small herds (Humphries, 2007). Additionally, the sale of soft antlers, once a significant income source, has nearly ceased due to market changes in Asia and regulatory bans in countries like Korea. Predation and environmental challenges further complicate the market landscape, as large herds attract predators, increasing the need for protective measures (Jernsletten & Klokov, 2002). Despite these challenges, reindeer meat commands a high price across Europe and North America, with demand often exceeding supply. However, the industry's success is closely tied to location, infrastructure, and regulation. Proximity to large population centers or existing infrastructure can significantly reduce costs and improve market access. Conversely, remote operations face higher costs and logistical difficulties (Humphries, 2007).

Ultimately, the reindeer industry requires a delicate balance between traditional practices and modern economic strategies. Ensuring sustainable herd sizes, supporting community involvement, and navigating complex regulatory environments are crucial for the future success of reindeer herding in the Mackenzie Delta and beyond. These considerations led to Binder's decision to sell the reindeer herd to the IRC in 2021, ending the private ownership of the herd and helping to ensure the community's food security and the preservation of Inuvialuit cultural traditions (IRC, n.d.; CBC News, 2021). The IRC reindeer herding team will oversee the herd's revitalization, with the main objective of increasing the herd from its current number of 2,200 to 2,800 animals to ensure a sustainable processing level (CBC News, 2021). These plans are directly connected to the IRC initiative to create a Country Food Processing Plant that acquires country food from Inuvialuit and distributes it to those who cannot obtain it themselves (IRC, n.d.). The IRC also plans to provide meat to beneficiaries of the Inuvialuit Final Agreement (CBC News, 2021). The plant opened in Inuvik during 2021 and processes animals from community hunts as well as reindeer meat to supply traditional country food to the community (Fillion et al., 2014). [12] It will also offer employment and training opportunities, on-the-land learning and education, tourism opportunities for Inuvialuit beneficiaries, and food processing courses so Inuvialuit can learn to make various products out of reindeer (IRC, n.d.; CBC News, 2021). This initiative underscores a strategic approach towards Indigenous autonomy and governance, effectively marrying ancestral wisdom with modern economic strategies to enhance food sovereignty, and thus enhancing community welfare and cultural continuity (IRC, n.d.). As Duane Ningaqsiq Smith, IRC Chair and CEO stated, "We've been indirectly, directly engaged for decades" (CBC News, 2021).

Though the IRC's role is mainly economic, its activities have governance implications by contributing to the daily administration of the region (Wilson & Alcantara, 2012). The IRC's success, marked by its cultural integration and emphasis on

community-based governance, is a potential model for adaptation by other governance structures. By leveraging local resources and enhancing market access, the IRC aims to create a stable and prosperous reindeer herding industry that benefits all Inuvialuit members (IRC, n.d.). This represents a form of self-governance that is responsive and evolves with the community's needs and aspirations (Wilson & Alcantara, 2012; Selle & Wilson, 2022).

FIGURE 22
Inuvialuit Reindeer Herder in the Mackenzie Delta

Note. From [Inuvialuit Reindeer Herder in the Mackenzie Delta] [Photograph], by A. Fleming, c. 1930, NWT Archives (N-1979-050-0306), Yellowknife, NT.

Modern Evolution: From Herding Traditions to Corporate Strategy

The Inuvialuit communities' reindeer herding journey is a testament to adaptation, resilience, and the integration of tradition with economic development. The Inuvialuit Regional Corporation's oversight of the reindeer herd highlights the innovative union of traditional practices and modern economic frameworks, paving the way for sustainable development and Indigenous autonomy. This approach offers key insights into cultural preservation, economic resilience, and self-governance for Indigenous communities globally. The establishment and operations of the IRC raise important questions about minimizing assimilation into colonial systems (e.g., corporations) while pursuing self-determination. By managing lands and investments stemming from the Settlement, the Inuvialuit have ensured equitable benefit sharing among all beneficiaries. Elected directors' governance of the IRC illustrates its accountability to the community, in contrast to governmental control (*Inuvialuit Final Agreement,* n.d.; Wilson & Alcantara, 2012). Furthermore, the IRC's dedication to traditional food-sharing practices and its goal to expand the reindeer herd demonstrates its broader role in regional governance and Indigenous leadership. Finally, the IRC's effectiveness as a governance institution is

highlighted by financial soundness and elder participation (Wilson & Alcantara, 2012; Simeone, 2007). As Indigenous communities worldwide endeavour to amalgamate traditional practices with modern economic demands, the Inuvialuit approach provides invaluable lessons in cultural preservation, economic sustainability, and governance.

Conclusion

The history of reindeer herding within North America is a powerful narrative on a global Indigenous scale. While reindeer herding is a traditional practice in many Arctic regions, it is important to understand how governments can use traditional practices from other Indigenous groups to bolster their own colonial goals, such as keeping Inuit families geographically connected to specific areas. However, it is also important to acknowledge how the narrative became more complex and nuanced as relationships and marriages developed between the Inuvialuit and Sámi and as communities adapted and changed. Now, the goal is for reindeer herding to not only drive sustainable development and economic empowerment but to also be one of the tools for Inuvialuit self-determination.

The IRC's acquisition of the reindeer herd, coupled with initiatives like the Country Food Processing Plant, signals a significant commitment to community food security and preserving Inuvialuit cultural practices (IRC, n.d.) and underscores a strategic approach towards Inuvialuit autonomy and self-governance. It exemplifies adaptive self-governance that dynamically responds to the community's evolving needs and goals (IRC, n.d.). From this history and experience, we can learn several important lessons for Indigenous economic development:

1. Integrating traditional practices with modern economic frameworks can provide a robust foundation for sustainable development. The IRC's success in developing the Country Foods Processing Plant and managing the reindeer herd illustrates how creative practices can be leveraged to create economic opportunities. This integration provides a robust foundation for sustainable development and navigates contemporary challenges while maintaining cultural identity.
2. The importance of self-governance and community-driven initiatives cannot be overstated. The IRC's approach emphasizes direct governance by elected directors accountable to the community, offering a model of effective and inclusive Indigenous economic development. Ensuring that the benefits of economic activities are shared equitably among all beneficiaries promotes social cohesion and collective well-being.
3. The resilience and adaptability shown by the Inuvialuit in the face of historical and contemporary challenges highlight the critical role of perseverance, adaptability, and strategic planning in Indigenous economic development.

The saga of reindeer herding within North America from its introduction to the present day showcases resilience, adaptability, and combining traditional knowledge (both local and international) with modern strategies to achieve goals. The Inuvialuit experience with reindeer herding and the establishment of the IRC provide valuable insights into how Indigenous communities can achieve the economic empowerment and self-determination necessary to create sustainable and prosperous futures.

FIGURE 23
A Young Reindeer

Note. From File:TinyReindeer.jpg [Photograph], by F. M. Marzoa Alonso, July 2006, Wikimedia Commons, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:TinyReindeer.jpg.

END NOTES

1 The feedback from these advertisements indicated that successful recruitment required travelling to Sápmi to engage herders directly. Additionally, the responses underscored the importance of including herding dogs in the project to ensure its success (Jackson, 1891).

2 That said, while broad reindeer ownership brought the Inupiat into the private property system, it was inadequate for the industry's commercialization (Demuth, 2012).

3 For some context, Jackson's offer to the Sámi was made during the 1852 Sámi rebellion against Norway: the Sámi objected to policies mandating the Norwegian language, discouraging the Sámi's nomadic lifestyle, and enforcing boarding school attendance, correctly viewing them as attempts to assimilate the Sámi and sever ties with their heritage (Berg, 2013).

4 Indeed, their descendants often regard their Sámi heritage and Inupiat roots as equal (Nyborg, 2010).

[5] Lomen, who was the predominant non-Inuit reindeer owner in Alaska, believed that the Act was a reaction to the burgeoning reindeer meat market's threat to the cattle industry's dominance and blamed the Act for triggering opposition to non-Inuit reindeer ownership amid the economic downturn of the era (Finstad, Kielland, & Schneider, 2006; Lomen, 1954).

[6] Interestingly, no village altogether ceased reindeer herding: those without reindeer by 1940 likely never herded in the first place.

[7] Not all the reindeer remained with the Sámi. Of the initial 300 reindeer, 50 were transported to the Anglo-Newfoundland Development Company to be used for hauling logs to its paper mill in Grand Falls (Bartlett, 2010), while another 50 were sold to an experimental reindeer project in western Canada.

[8] The Alaskan reindeer had been used as transport in British Columbia and the Yukon (Vorren, 1994; Fjeld & Muus, 2012; Conaty & Binder, 2004), and the Labrador project paved the way for projects on Baffin Island and the Northwest Territories. There was discussion of projects in Hudson's Bay along the rivers near York Factory and Moose Factory and even plans to include Winnipeg, Manitoba and Cochrane, Alberta as wintering grounds (Privy Council Office, 1919).

[9] That said, while some researchers have noted the challenges in establishing a direct connection between sovereignty and the reindeer projects, it is unlikely that these projects were unrelated to Canadian authorities' concerns about the security of their northern territories (Smith, 2021).

[10] Ellen's mother later reflected that her participation was partly influenced by a six-month trip to Germany in 1930 as part of an exhibition showcasing Sámi lifestyle and culture. These shows, which are now recognized as perpetuating notions of white racial superiority, ironically ignited a curiosity in Ellen's mother about life in other countries and the potential for a better future (Conaty & Binder, 2012; Lehtola, 2013).

[11] These entities include the Inuvialuit Land Administration, Inuvialuit Game Council, Inuvialuit Hunters and Trappers Committee, and the Canadian Wildlife Service.

[12] The Country Food Plant processes various animals, including moose, reindeer, muskox, beaver, whale, and several species of fish.

Author's Note

Many thanks go to Dr. Kurtis Boyer for his encouragement and feedback on an earlier version of this paper.

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Indigenous Economic Development Education: Aligning Curriculum with Community Aspirations

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ABSTRACT

This research examines how postsecondary economic development curricula can align with the needs of Indigenous communities in Canada. Drawing on Indigenous research principles and mixed methods design, the study combines a literature review with semi-structured interviews (n=17) and an online survey (n=43) of Indigenous economic development practitioners and prospective students. Key curriculum priorities include leadership, governance, financial literacy, cultural competency, Indigenous knowledge systems, entrepreneurship and business skills, and legal and regulatory frameworks. Participants emphasized the central role of Indigenous economic development corporations; the importance of meaningful employment and revenue generation for community well-being; and the need to embed Elders, Indigenous instructors, and Indigenous knowledge. The findings support flexible program structures that allow students to maintain employment while participating in online learning with short in-person residency components. Overall, the study provides early guidance for designing culturally grounded economic development education that supports Indigenous self-determination, builds local capacity, and contributes to sustainable economies.

KEYWORDS: Indigenous economic development, Indigenous curriculum, Indigenous pedagogies

Positionality

A positionality statement invites readers into a clearer relationship with the researcher and honours Indigenous protocol (Wilson, 2008). It clarifies how we see the world and how we are connected to the research and participants. Som ao tiniye (Tasha Brooks) is a member of the Cowichan Tribes and an assistant professor at Royal Roads University, and she sits on her community's economic development board. Her scholarly and professional work is grounded in relationships with Indigenous communities and organizations, including Indigenous economic development corporations, postsecondary partners, and national Indigenous organizations. She comes to this research as both a community member and an educator who has witnessed how colonial education systems have limited Indigenous learners and constrained economic possibilities, as well as how Indigenous-led programs can foster confidence, skills, and community well-being.

Sarah Gowans is a DBA candidate at Royal Roads University and a research assistant supporting research led by Dr. Tasha Brooks. Born in Inuvik, Northwest Territories, Sarah was adopted and raised by her father (who is of Scottish descent) and her mother (an Anglo-Irish French Canadian). Her research focuses on reconciliation with Indigenous Peoples across Canada and explores how society can learn from Indigenous communities to connect with the land and environment and foster meaningful partnerships built on trust and reciprocity.

Introduction

Indigenous economic development in Canada is a pathway to self-determination (Terrill & Boutilier, 2019), reconciliation (Hoicka et al., 2021), achieving sustainable development goals (Scheyvens et al., 2021), and strengthening socioeconomic conditions in Indigenous communities (Sengupta, 2015). This research focuses on how economic development education can align with the economic aspirations and needs of Indigenous communities across Canada. Despite progress in recognizing Indigenous perspectives in many sectors, we still know too little about how these perspectives and needs should shape economic development education.

This study explores the economic aspirations and educational needs of Indigenous communities and individuals across Canada and how these shared priorities can shape economic development curricula that address community-specific needs. This question acknowledges the diversity among Indigenous communities while aiming to identify common themes that can serve as a foundation for educational programs focused on Indigenous economic empowerment. A curriculum rooted in an Indigenous paradigm is essential for enhancing student engagement and educational outcomes (Pidgeon, 2018).

Literature Review

The literature on Indigenous economic development, Indigenous education, and business curriculum design reveals several interconnected themes that inform this study. Historical analyses illustrate how Indigenous governance systems and economies were disrupted through colonization, the Indian Act, and subsequent policies that limited economic self-determination (Gaudry, 2016; Woolford, 2009). Contemporary economic analysis highlights both ongoing socioeconomic gaps and the notable growth and potential of the Indigenous economy in Canada (Ayotte & Bridger, 2022; National Indigenous Economic Development Board [NIEDB], 2019). Meanwhile, scholars and organizations stress that meaningful progress in Indigenous economic development relies on education systems that enhance Indigenous capacity, leadership, and governance (Pidgeon, 2018; Cando, n.d.).

A related body of scholarship criticizes the limitations of Western postsecondary systems and emphasizes the need for curricula that incorporate Indigenous pedagogies, worldviews, and community priorities. This work highlights tensions between Indigenous knowledge systems and Western business education, noting that while some programs and institutions try to make space for Indigenous perspectives, others argue that business schools need deeper structural reforms to effectively support Indigenous learners (Bastien et al., 2022; Woods et al., 2022). Organizational and policy reports strengthen the call for culturally grounded capacity-building programs that prepare Indigenous learners and practitioners to navigate structural barriers, foster partnerships, and promote community-driven economic priorities in Canada (Cando, n.d.; Luminary, 2025; NIEDB, 2024).

Overall, this literature indicates that creating effective Indigenous economic development curricula requires considering historical context, current economic realities, Indigenous pedagogies, and the capacity needs identified by communities and practitioners themselves. Organizational and policy literature also stress that capacity building within economic development corporations and First Nation governments depends on education that combines analytical, relational, and cultural skills. These elements collectively highlight the necessity for Indigenous economic development curricula that are historically informed, analytically robust, organizationally relevant, and culturally rooted.

The literature reviewed for this study was identified through keyword searches in academic databases (“Indigenous economic development,” “Indigenous business curriculum,” “Indigenization business school,” and “Indigenous pedagogy higher education”) and through citation tracing from key articles and reports. Priority was given to scholarship that examined Indigenous economic development, Indigenous pedagogies and epistemologies in higher education, and the emerging field of Indigenous business education, as well as organizational and policy reports from Indigenous and sectoral organizations such as the National Indigenous Economic Development Board, Indigenous Works, and the Council for the Advancement of Native Development Officers.

Historical Context of Indigenous Economies

Historically, Indigenous people had diverse governance systems and economies, engaging in trade among themselves long before European contact (Gaudry, 2016). European contact then introduced a colonial economy involving Indigenous people in the fur trade, which significantly changed traditional economies. However, these changes quickly became tools of domination and oppression, especially through colonization. The Royal Proclamation and the Indian Act of 1867 formalized these oppressive structures, deeply suppressing Indigenous economies (Woolford, 2009). The historical path of these policies shows a pattern of systemic economic marginalization that Indigenous communities continue to confront (Daschuk, 2013).

The Indigenous economy remained largely suppressed until a future beyond the Indian Act could be imagined. Key legal and policy milestones, such as Calder et al. v. Attorney-General of British Columbia (1973), signalled a shift toward Indigenous economic independence. This case inspired policies such as the Comprehensive Land Claims policy and the James Bay and Northern Quebec Agreement, which laid the foundation for modern treaties (Rodon, 2021). These advancements were further strengthened by the First Nations Lands Management Act in 1996, giving communities greater control over their lands (Crown-Indigenous Relations and Northern Affairs Canada, 2023). Collectively, these efforts represent steps toward economic sovereignty, supported by initiatives like Call to Action 92 of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (2015), which called for corporate collaboration in economic reconciliation. These milestones set the foundation for the current Indigenous economy.

Current State of the Indigenous Economy

The Indigenous Peoples of Canada are the fastest-growing demographic, including First Nations, Métis, and Inuit, and currently make up 1.81 million people, or 5% of Canada's population (Statistics Canada, 2023a). This rapid population increase emphasizes the growing role of Indigenous participation in the country's economy. The First Nations community consists of more than 630 nations and 1.05 million individuals (Statistics Canada, 2023a). The Métis, with 642,220 members, are the fastest-growing Indigenous group, while the Inuit, numbering 70,500, mainly live in Arctic regions (Statistics Canada, 2023a).

Drawing on Statistics Canada's Indigenous Peoples Economic Account, Ayotte and Bridger (2022) estimate that the Indigenous economy contributed 2.2% of Canada's GDP, or $48.9 billion in 2020, with growth potential toward a $100-billion economy. In this account, "Indigenous GDP" refers specifically to the combined income of Indigenous individuals and the operating surplus of Indigenous-owned businesses. Despite these contributions, discrepancies in data on Indigenous businesses raise significant concerns. Statistics Canada (2023b) reports a decline to 17,417 businesses, while the Canadian Council for Aboriginal Business estimates over 50,000 businesses ([CCAB], 2022). This stark contrast highlights a need for consistent data collection to accurately measure the scope and impact of Indigenous entrepreneurship.

Indigenous Economic Development Corporations (IEDCs) are vital economic drivers within many communities. Owned collectively, IEDCs generate important own-source revenues, directly supporting community development and governance. For example, these corporations contribute $2.3 billion annually to First Nations governments (First Nations Financial Management Board, 2020). However, systemic barriers such as limited access to capital and governance challenges hinder IEDCs from reaching their full potential (CCAB, 2022). Overcoming these barriers is crucial to unlocking IEDCs as engines of sustainable economic growth.

Organizational reports supplement this statistical overview of the Indigenous economy. The NIEDB's Indigenous Economic Progress Reports monitor disparities and advancements in income, employment, education, and business development, highlighting the importance of education and skills development in reducing economic gaps (NIEDB, 2024). Indigenous Works' (2017) Corporate Indigenous Engagement Index consistently reveals very low engagement levels between corporate Canada and Indigenous communities, with average scores around 13 out of 100, suggesting that most firms are not yet ready to work effectively with Indigenous nations, businesses, and workers. Sectoral organizations provide further insights; for example, the Council for the Advancement of Native Development Officers (Cando) has established national standards and training pathways for Indigenous economic development officers to become certified as Technical or Professional Aboriginal Economic Development Officers (Cando, n.d.), and Luminary promotes Indigenous innovation through curriculum, governance, and workforce development across eight national impact themes (Luminary, 2025).

Taken together, these historical, demographic, legal, and economic developments demonstrate an Indigenous economy that is growing in size while becoming more intricate in governance, partnership arrangements, and regulatory frameworks. The rise of Indigenous GDP, the growing influence of development corporations, and the diversification of revenue sources all indicate increasing demand for practitioners. At the same time, ongoing systemic barriers remain, including inconsistent data, limited access to capital, and structural constraints shaped by the Indian Act, highlighting the need for education that is analytically rigorous, culturally informed, and responsive to community-defined economic objectives.

Organizational and Governance Perspectives on Capacity Building

Insights shared by practitioner-focused literature also align with broader insights from organizational theory. Classic works in organizational learning and decision-making highlight that effective leadership in complex environments requires the ability to interpret information and engage in strategic sensemaking (Weick, 1995), navigate governance structures with clarity (Mintzberg, 2009), and guide organizations through uncertainty by managing competing priorities (March, 1991). These frameworks emphasize competencies that closely reflect the demands outlined in the Indigenous economic development literature mentioned above. Together, these organizational and Indigenous perspectives suggest that economic development practitioners need a mix of

analytical, relational, and governance skills that can be developed through curriculum tailored specifically for Indigenous contexts.

Educational Needs and Aspirations in Indigenous Communities

Indigenous economic development challenges are deeply connected to historical and ongoing educational disparities. Policies like the residential school system forcibly separated Indigenous children from their families and cultural environments, leading to long-term negative effects on culture, language, and economic well-being (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015). Statistics Canada (2016) likewise reports lower high school graduation rates among Indigenous populations, which limits their access to higher education and economic opportunities (Hennessey & Landine, 2018). These systemic harms have contributed to ongoing gaps in educational achievement, employment, and income between Indigenous and non-Indigenous populations.

Closing this educational gap is essential for promoting economic equity. Opportunities to engage in training and upskilling can result in improved economic outcomes and greater participation in the labour market (Action Canada, 2020). And recent initiatives have aimed at decolonizing education to better align curricula with Indigenous aspirations. For example, institutions can foster more culturally responsive learning environments by co-creating educational programs that incorporate Indigenous knowledge systems and community objectives (Pratt et al., 2018). These efforts are vital for repairing the educational structures disrupted by colonialism.

Indigenous Pedagogies and Epistemologies in Business Education

Within this conversation, equitable access and more transformative approaches to curriculum are framed as key ways to respond to educational disparities. Indigenous pedagogies offer an alternative framework rooted in relationality, community, and holistic learning (Woods et al., 2022). Rather than merely incorporating Indigenous content, these approaches challenge power dynamics and prioritize Indigenous epistemologies characterized by storytelling, experiential learning, and mentorship (Fellner, 2018). Recent initiatives supported by the Business Association of Canada, including studies of Indigenous allyship and on advancing the Indigenization of Canadian business schools, further highlight the need to move beyond token inclusion of Indigenous content toward deeper changes in governance, curriculum, and relationships with Indigenous communities (Aussant et al., 2023).

This method emphasizes learning from and with the land, which fosters interconnectedness and practical engagement (Ragoonaden & Mueller, 2017). However, structural barriers hinder efforts to integrate Indigenous pedagogies into traditional business education. These include resistance within Western-centric institutions, challenges in revising assessment models, and a lack of faculty familiar with Indigenous ways of knowing (Doucette et al., 2021). Overcoming these challenges requires institutional commitment to systemic reform, including faculty training and curriculum restructuring

Economic Development and Indigenous Business Curriculum

Emerging Indigenous business curricula attempt to bring Indigenous values, histories, and knowledge systems into conversations with mainstream economic concepts to create more culturally responsive learning environments, preparing students to address unique socioeconomic challenges (Bastien et al., 2022; Woods et al., 2022). Key features include traditional trade practices, community enterprises, and sustainable business aligned with Indigenous values (Hindle & Moroz, 2010). Additionally, these curricula explore historical and contemporary macroeconomic factors, such as colonization, treaties, and legislation like The Indian Act, influencing Indigenous economic development. By contextualizing these elements, Indigenous business education equips students with the tools to navigate complex realities while fostering community growth.

Woods et al. (2022) offer a compelling framework for integrating Indigenous worldviews into business education, using Māori perspectives as a case study. This framework emphasizes conceptual, political, cultural, and relational dimensions, aligning with the principles of two-eyed seeing (Bartlett et al., 2012). These approaches foster mutual respect between Indigenous and Western knowledge systems, creating a richer and more inclusive educational experience.

At the same time, scholars point out that business schools remain deeply grounded in Western epistemologies and institutional logics and question how far curricula can go in genuinely reconciling these knowledge systems if they are not accompanied by structural changes (Woods et al., 2022). While some scholars argue that Indigenous business curricula can help bring Indigenous and Western knowledge systems into a productive relationship (Woods et al., 2022), others caution that such bridging may be limited without fundamental shifts in institutional power structures and epistemologies (Bastien et al., 2022).

In the end, the literature emphasizes the interplay between historical legacies, educational disparities, and economic opportunities in shaping the contemporary Indigenous economy. Yet despite significant progress, systemic barriers persist, limiting the potential of Indigenous economic and educational initiatives. Future research should focus on specific strategies to integrate Indigenous pedagogies into business education, address systemic inequities, and build sustainable pathways for economic reconciliation.

Methodology

In this section, we present the study's methodological design. We discuss strategy, data collection methods, and our analytical framework.

Research Design

This study used a mixed-methods design to explore the educational needs and economic aspirations of Indigenous communities in relation to Indigenous economic development curricula. The qualitative component consisted of semi-structured interviews with 17 participants, including Indigenous economic development officers, managers and board members of Indigenous economic development corporations, and prospective students

interested in Indigenous economic development education. The quantitative component consisted of an online survey completed by 43 respondents from similar groups. The interview guide included questions on economic development goals, current and future skill requirements, preferred program formats, and the role of Indigenous knowledge and Elders in education. The survey instrument mirrored these themes with both closed- and open-ended questions on demographic characteristics (e.g., role, years of experience, perceived skills needed, and curriculum priorities). Together, these methods provided both depth and breadth, allowing individual narratives to be interpreted alongside broader patterns across respondents.

Participant Characteristics and Scope

Survey respondents represented a cross-section of those currently engaged in Indigenous economic development and individuals interested in pursuing Indigenous economic development education. Among survey participants, 65.1% were working in Indigenous economic development roles and 34.9% identified as prospective students. Respondents reported experience in First Nation governments, Indigenous development corporations, Indigenous-owned enterprises, community-based program delivery, board governance, and Indigenous service organizations. Regarding identity, 86.7% of respondents self-identified as First Nations and 13.3% as Métis. Most respondents did not report their geographic region, which limits the ability to interpret findings by province or territory; however, responses reflected both on-reserve and urban Indigenous service contexts across multiple nations.

The 17 interview participants provided valuable insights and represented a diverse group of Indigenous and non-Indigenous practitioners, leaders, and prospective students. Interviewees included First Nation, non-Indigenous, and Métis economic development managers, board members, and educators, as well as prospective Indigenous economic development students. Participants were based in various regions, including British Columbia, central Canada, and eastern Canada, and brought experience from both on-reserve and urban Indigenous economic development. This variety of roles and backgrounds supports the study's goal of identifying curriculum needs across different governance, organizational, and educational contexts, while recognising that the sample cannot be considered regionally representative.

The methodological approach involves a five-step process based on relationships, storytelling, analysis, integration, and verification with feedback. The mixed-methods approach allows for multiple voices from various communities and respects the knowledge of the greatest number of individuals (Chilisa & Tsheko, 2014). The design combines qualitative data from semi-structured interviews with quantitative survey data to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the research question. This approach aligns with the relational nature of an Indigenous paradigm by enabling one-on-one interactions during the interview process, reducing power dynamics by seeing participants as co-researchers (Chilisa & Tsheko, 2014). This method combines the value of both qualitative and quantitative data and is suitable for identifying areas of strength and contextually relevant information (Martel et al., 2022).

Step One: Data Collection Through Relationships.
This study involved two participant groups: potential students for economic development courses and individuals engaged in Indigenous economic development. The interview participants were purposively selected, using the researcher's extensive networks with Indigenous economic development employees, organizations, and student networks. Through relationships with initial participants, a snowball technique was employed to recruit additional participants, alongside an online recruitment initiative. These groups were chosen to provide diverse perspectives. Quantitative data were collected through a survey posted on various social media outlets and through word-of-mouth.

Step Two: Storytelling Through Semi-Structured Interviews.
After establishing these relationships, the researchers moved forward with qualitative data collection. This mixed-methods study used semi-structured interviews with both participant groups. Seventeen interviews followed a semi-structured format, allowing flexibility and creating a more conversational style to gather personal stories and experiences. A reflexive approach ensured that language and dialogue remained respectful and appropriate. This additional flexibility aims to reduce the power dynamics often associated with interviews. Additionally, some interviews were recorded on the land or during walks along the river, while others took place over shared meals.

Step Three: The Bigger Picture Through Survey Questionnaires.
Alongside the interviews, we conducted an online survey to identify broader trends and patterns that might not emerge from individual stories. This survey allowed us to reach a wider range of 43 participants, providing valuable quantitative insight into the larger context in which these communities exist.

Step Four: Pulling Together Through Data Analysis.
Thematic analysis was used to identify themes and patterns from the interview transcripts and the qualitative parts of the surveys. Descriptive statistics were used to summarize the characteristics of each group participating in the survey. We searched for common ground between individual experiences and broader patterns to reveal both shared and distinct community aspirations. Qualitative and quantitative findings were integrated during the interpretation phase through a convergent mixed-methods approach, comparing interview themes with patterns in survey responses to identify similarities and differences in educational needs and priorities. This approach allowed the qualitative data to explain and enrich quantitative trends and the survey results to reveal the extent to which specific themes were shared among respondents.

Ethics and Data Governance

Ethics approval for this study was granted by the Royal Roads University Research Ethics Board. Since the project involved individual practitioners and prospective students from many First Nations, Métis, and Inuit communities across Canada, it was not conducted under a single community research agreement. Instead, the design

was guided by Indigenous data sovereignty principles, including First Nations OCAP principles, which focus on transparency, consent, and Indigenous authority over data relating to Indigenous Peoples. Participants received detailed consent forms explaining how their data would be used, how confidentiality would be protected, and their right to withdraw at any time. Interviews were recorded with permission, transcripts were shared with participants for clarification and verification, and all identifying information was removed after transcript checks were completed. Digital files were stored on password-protected devices and backed up to encrypted external drives, while physical materials were stored in a locked cabinet. Aggregate findings and plain-language summaries were provided to participants and interested communities to promote reciprocity and accountability.

Findings

The findings bring together themes from the interviews and survey to demonstrate how participants understand Indigenous economic development, the skills they deem essential, and what they expect from curriculum. Semi-structured interviews provided contextual accounts from Indigenous and non-Indigenous practitioners and prospective students, while the survey revealed broader patterns regarding skills, curriculum priorities, and pedagogical expectations. Together, these data illustrate the educational needs and economic aspirations of individuals involved in Indigenous economic development across diverse governance and organizational contexts.

Community Aspirations as the Foundation for Educational Needs

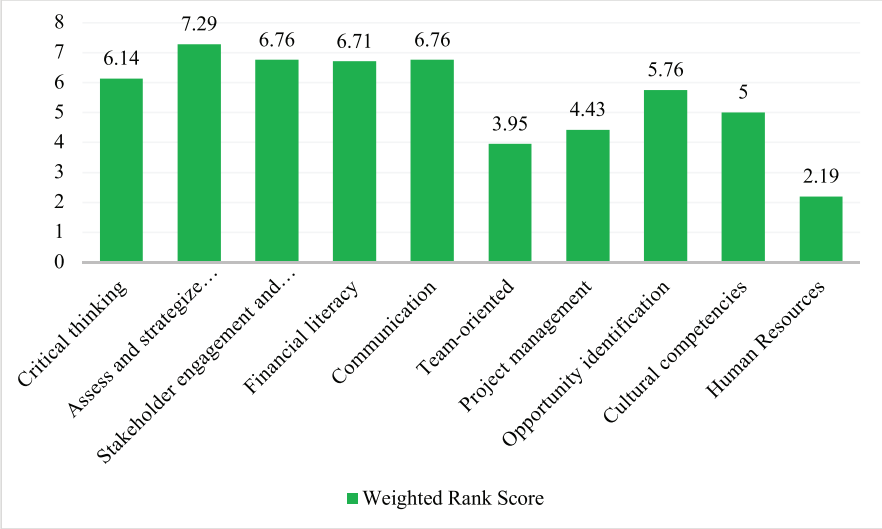
Throughout interviews, participants consistently described Indigenous economic development as rooted in three interconnected community goals: creating meaningful employment, generating revenue for community wellbeing, and integrating cultural values into economic activities. These aspirations shape practitioners' daily work and directly influence the educational competencies needed in the field.

Participants discussed employment not just as creating jobs but as building roles that enhance identity, belonging, and capacity within the Nation. As one manager noted, "We create ventures to employ our people, not just generate profit." This focus on meaningful work was often linked with revenue generation, not as a commercial goal but as a means to invest in community programs related to health, culture, and development. These themes highlight that community aspirations are multidimensional and provide the basis for designing curriculum.

Skills Required to Advance Community Economic Aspirations

The themes expressed by interview participants match the skills that survey respondents identified as most important. While practitioners explained the need to assess business opportunities through cultural, community, and financial perspectives, the survey confirmed that critical thinking, strategic evaluation, financial literacy, communication, and opportunity recognition are the top skills needed for effective work in Indigenous economic development, as shown in Figure 1.

FIGURE 1
Weighted Rank Scores for Skills Required in Indigenous Economic Development



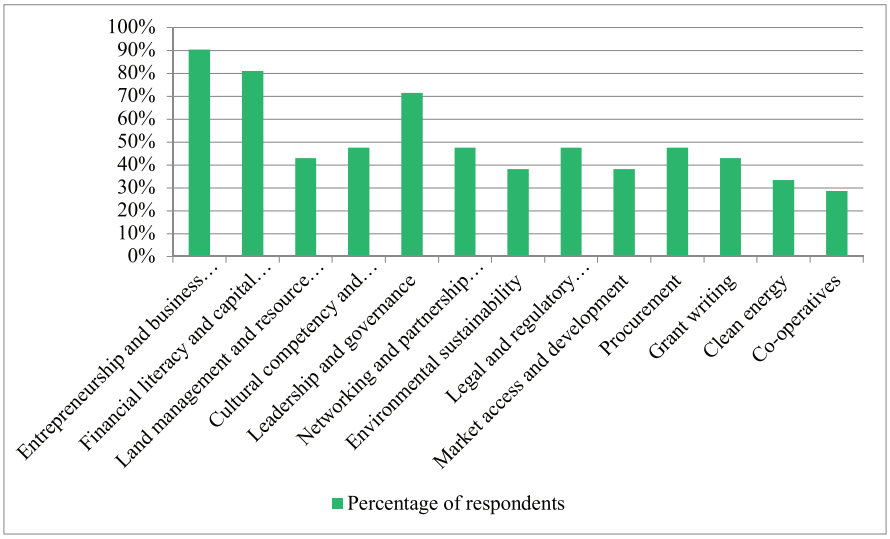
Note. Participants ranked ten skills from most to least important. Weighted rank scores were calculated by assigning numerical values to each rank position and averaging them across respondents. Higher scores reflect skills identified as higher priority.

Interview participants provided examples that clarify these quantitative findings. Practitioners described evaluating potential joint ventures, conducting feasibility studies, interpreting financial statements for leadership, and communicating economic scenarios in ways that respect community values and priorities. These themes indicate that curriculum in this area requires a solid analytical foundation while integrating these skills within Indigenous governance, community priorities, and local economic contexts.

Curriculum Content Grounded in the Realities of Indigenous Economic Development

Participants' descriptions of their work naturally translated into specific curriculum expectations. Interview participants emphasized governance literacy, partnership building, procurement, legal navigation, and the ability to assess opportunities grounded in community aspirations. Survey respondents expressed almost identical priorities. As shown in Figure 2, the top curricular topics were entrepreneurship and business skills, financial literacy and access to capital, leadership and governance, cultural competency and Indigenous knowledge systems, partnership development, and legal and regulatory environments.

FIGURE 2
Percentage of Respondents Identifying Key Economic Development Topics as Educational Priorities



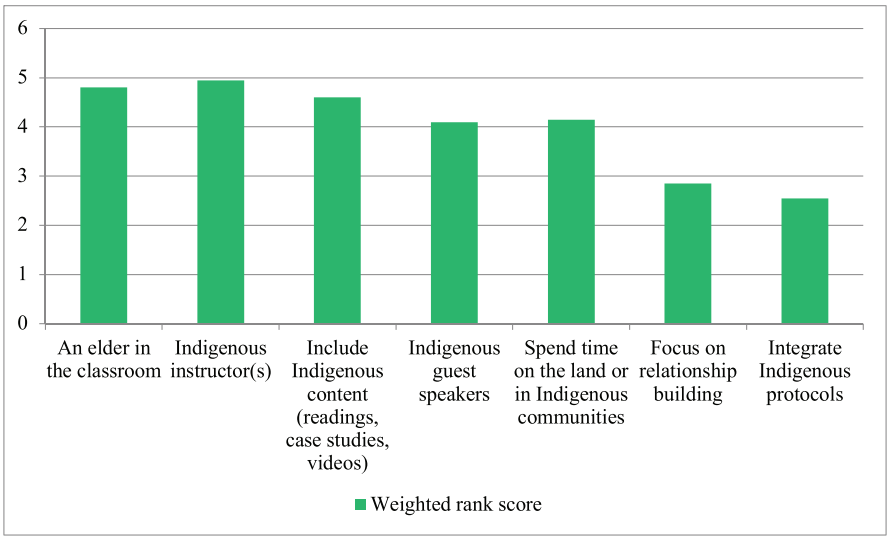
Note. Percentages indicate how many respondents identified each topic as important to include in curriculum.

These quantitative results build on the qualitative findings by identifying a clear set of competencies that practitioners and students believe are essential for supporting community-led economic strategies. The combined data indicates that Indigenous economic development education must prepare learners to make decisions that are financially sound, culturally rooted, and governance aligned.

Indigenous Knowledge and Pedagogy as Essential, Not Supplementary

One of the strongest areas of agreement across methods was the importance of embedding Indigenous knowledge and pedagogies throughout the curriculum. Interviews highlighted that cultural values influence economic decisions and partnership choices. One participant remarked that "I think it would be best having elders because they have a lot of knowledge and teaching that they can pass on to the students." Survey data supported this, with more than 90% of respondents seeing Indigenous knowledge integration as essential, as illustrated in Figure 3. Elders were the top-ranked method for embedding Indigenous knowledge, followed by Indigenous instructors, Indigenous case studies, guest speakers, and land-based learning.

FIGURE 3
Weighted Importance Scores for the Best Ways to Integrate Indigenous Knowledge and Perspectives into the Curriculum



Note. Scores reflect weighted rankings of participant preferences. A higher score indicates a method that respondents ranked as more important for integrating Indigenous knowledge and perspectives into the curriculum.

Across the interviews and survey, Indigenous pedagogies emerge not as an add-on but as the foundation for preparing learners for work that is relational, culturally embedded, and accountable to community.

Education as a Pathway to Capacity Building

Participants across methods highlighted that formal education plays a key role in developing capacity for Indigenous economic growth. Survey respondents overwhelmingly indicated that Indigenous economic development education is very useful or extremely useful for employment, and interview participants shared how formal training boosted their confidence, improved decision-making, and supported career advancement within Indigenous governments and development corporations. Education was seen not just as a credentialing process but as a practical tool to help nations as they take on increasingly complex economic strategies, partnerships, and governance responsibilities.

Participants also emphasized that access to such education largely depends on program structure. Survey results show that 86.7% of respondents viewed the ability to balance employment with online learning as crucial, supporting interview accounts of heavy workloads, caregiving duties, and community commitments. Most also

highlighted the significance of relationship-building components (60%), such as short residencies that enable students to connect with peers, Elders, and instructors in culturally meaningful ways. Preferences were divided among synchronous online classes (53.3%) and asynchronous materials (26.7%); notably, 86.7% of respondents also endorsed the inclusion of at least one face-to-face residency, indicating strong support for hybrid program structures.

Nearly half of respondents preferred one face-to-face residency (46.7%), with 40% favouring two residencies, indicating that limited in-person interaction is valued when it supports relational learning but remains manageable for working adults. Preferences for full-time (46.7%) versus part-time (26.7%) study further confirm that learners need multiple pathways to participation.

Together, these quantitative and qualitative findings show that high-quality, culturally grounded economic development education must be paired with delivery methods that respect learners' responsibilities and support relational, community-centred pedagogies. Programs that combine online flexibility with opportunities for meaningful in-person connection best match the realities and expectations of both current practitioners and prospective students.

Discussion and Conclusion

This research examined the educational needs and economic aspirations of Indigenous communities across Canada to guide future economic development curricula. The goals were to identify common themes and essential skills in Indigenous economic development, incorporate Indigenous knowledge and perspectives into the curriculum, and promote the creation of a sustainable and empowering economic framework for Indigenous communities.

This study makes several important contributions to the literature. First, the research identifies key skills such as critical thinking, financial literacy, strategic assessment, and communication. This detailed identification offers a foundational framework for creating comprehensive educational programs tailored to the needs of Indigenous economic development.

Second, it emphasizes the importance of integrating Indigenous knowledge and perspectives throughout economic development curricula: doing so provides a model for educational institutions to develop culturally responsive programs that honour Indigenous ways of knowing and learning. Interestingly, the findings reveal differences between potential students and those currently working in economic development regarding their educational approach and their desire to incorporate Indigenous knowledge into the curriculum. While both groups acknowledge the importance of culturally relevant education, those actively engaged in the field focus on the practical application of Indigenous knowledge in economic activities. In contrast, potential students emphasise a more comprehensive integration of Indigenous perspectives throughout all educational content.

These findings have implications for policymakers and educators, highlighting the need for postsecondary institutions to support Indigenous-led educational initiatives

and curricula development. Policy, such as collective agreements or Indigenous strategic plans, should include the role of Elders and multiple perspectives in Indigenous programs. Educational institutions must commit to ongoing collaboration with Indigenous communities to ensure that their educational initiatives are academically rigorous, culturally relevant, and responsive to evolving community needs.

Third, the study highlights the role of IEDCs as essential vehicles for achieving community goals such as job creation and revenue generation. The findings show that IEDCs are vital to Indigenous communities' economic and social fabric, acting as mechanisms for economic activity and tools for social change. They create jobs and generate revenue that can be reinvested into community welfare programs, thereby improving overall community well-being. Course content should focus on strategies to achieve these goals rather than the specifics within industries. This broad approach will enable a curriculum that responds to a wide range of economic initiatives and promotes practical experience, underscoring the potential of Indigenous economic development curricula to play a vital role in driving socioeconomic progress and supporting self-determination within Indigenous communities.

Finally, there is a need to enhance capacity within Indigenous economic development organizations. Training programs should concentrate on developing the identified essential skills and offer opportunities for ongoing professional growth while maintaining employment. This strategy can help cultivate a new generation of leaders capable of guiding and advancing economic initiatives within Indigenous communities.

In conclusion, this research offers valuable insights into the educational needs and economic aspirations of Indigenous communities in Canada. By highlighting the importance of integrating Indigenous knowledge and identifying critical skills and topics for academic programs, the study helps develop more effective and culturally responsive Indigenous economic development curricula. The role of IEDCs as instruments for achieving community goals further underscores the link between economic activity and social well-being within Indigenous contexts.

Author's Note

This project was made possible through support from the New Ways Fund (Royal Roads University), whose contribution enabled the data collection and research activities undertaken in this study. The views expressed here are solely those of the authors and do not represent the positions of the funder.

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Indigenous and Non-Indigenous Unemployment, Employment and Participation Rates Through 2024: Education is Strongly Related to These Three Rates

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MONTREAL, CANADA

ABSTRACT

The overall employment picture for the Indigenous population living off-reserve was worse in 2024 than in 2023, and it was also worse in 2023 compared to 2022. They were also worse for non-Indigenous people in 2024, compared to 2023. Unemployment rates were higher, and employment and participation rates were lower. Employment, unemployment, and participation rates have been more favourable for the non-Indigenous population than for the Indigenous population. This has been the case in every year, except one, since 2007, which is the earliest that the data has been available. However, the educational level achieved is a critical factor.

When educational levels are higher, unemployment rates are lower, and employment and participation rates are higher. Further, the participation rates for the Indigenous population were higher for each comparable education level than for the non-Indigenous population from 2007 through 2024, except for four years.

Introduction

The article examines employment and educational data in Canada, excluding the territories, for Indigenous people who are 15 years and older, living off reserves, and for the non-Indigenous population, from 2007 through 2024. The data since 2007 is provided to enable the reader to assess the changes over time. The focus is primarily on the changes between 2024, 2023, and 2022. The employment data that will be examined are the Employment, Unemployment, and Participation Rates.

The employment rate is the percent of those working in the total population who are over the age of 15. The participation rate is the percent of those employed and those seeking to be employed over the same total population of those over 15 years old. The higher these rates, in general, the better the economy is thought to be doing. In contrast, the lower the unemployment rate, the better the economy is believed to be doing. The unemployment rate is the percent of those seeking employment divided by those employed and those seeking employment. The combination of those employed and those unemployed (that is, those seeking employment) is defined as the labour force. Therefore, another way of defining the unemployment rate is the percent of those unemployed in the labour force. It may be helpful to note that the employment and unemployment rates are not directly related as they are measured in different ways.

Unemployment Rates

The unemployment rates for the Indigenous population in 2024, 2023 and 2022 were 9.8, 8.7 and 7.9, respectively. This makes for 2 years of increasing unemployment rates. These were increases of 12.6% in 2024 from 2023 and 10.1% from 2022. The non-Indigenous population unemployment rate also increased in 2024 to 6.3% from 5.4% in 2023, and from 5.3% in 2022, increases of 16.7% in 2024 from 2023, and 1.9% in 2023 from 2022.

Although the unemployment rate has been consistently higher for the Indigenous population than the non-Indigenous population, the differences of 2.8% in 2022, and 3.3% in 2023, and 3.5% in 2024 were the lowest they have previously been. Further, the difference in the unemployment rates for the Indigenous and non-Indigenous populations decreased each year from 2016 to 2022. However, this downward trend has not continued since 2022 and may be an issue of increasing concern going forward, if the unemployment rates continue to increase. On a more positive note, the Indigenous peoples' 2024 unemployment rate of 9.8% is lower than for any year except 2023; and has improved significantly from their 2020 Covid-19 rate of 13.9%.

TABLE 1
Unemployment Rate
15 Years and over - Living off reserves

	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
Indigenous peoples	11	10.5	14.1	14.5	13.4	13	12.1	11.7	12.6	12.8	11.7	10.4	10.3	13.9	11.3	7.9	8.7	9.8
Non-Indigenous people	6.1	6.2	8.3	8	7.5	7.3	7	6.9	6.8	6.9	6.3	5.7	5.6	9.5	7.4	5.3	5.4	6.3
Difference in Unemployment Rates																		
	4.9	4.3	5.8	6.5	5.9	5.7	5.1	4.8	5.8	5.9	5.4	4.7	4.7	4.4	3.9	2.6	3.3	3.5
Percent change from previous year																		
Indigenous peoples		**-4.5**	34.3	2.8	**-7.6**	**-3.0**	**-6.9**	**-3.3**	7.7	1.6	-8.6	**-11.1**	-1.0	**35.0**	-18.7	**-30.1**	10.1	**12.6**
Non-Indigenous people		1.6	33.9	-3.6	-6.3	-2.7	-4.1	-1.4	-1.4	1.5	-8.7	-9.5	-1.8	69.6	-22.1	-28.4	1.9	16.7

*** Bold indicates the years in which Indigenous peoples unemployment rates improved more than the Non-Indigenous peoples, from the previous year.**

Statistics Canada. Table 14-10-0359-01 Labour force characteristics by Indigenous group living off reserve
https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/t1/tbl1/en/tv.action?pid=1410035901

Employment Rates

The employment rate in 2024 for the Indigenous population was 57.1%. This was a decrease from 58.7% in 2023 (a decrease of 2.7%), and from the 60.9% rate in 2022 (a decrease of 3.6% with respect to 2023). For the non-Indigenous population, the employment rate in 2024 was 61.2% compared to 62.1% in 2023 and 61.9% in 2022. The employment rate has been consistently higher for the non-Indigenous population. The difference in the employment rates was the lowest it had ever been in 2022, when it was 1.0%. In 2023, the difference increased to 3.5% in 2023 and continued to increase to 4.1% in 2024. Although the differences were higher than 4.1% in all but two years between 2007 and 2021, the increases over the past two years are concerning. It may indicate that the gap in employment rates that occurred from 2016 through 2022, which had been narrowing, is starting to widen. The annual percentage change in the employment rate tends to change more for the Indigenous population. The percent of the annual change in the employment rate was greater for the Indigenous population in 15 of the last 18 years.

TABLE 2
Employment Rate
15 Years and over - Living off reserves

	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
Indigenous peoples Rate of Employment	58.2	59.5	56.6	53.4	55.1	56.3	56.3	56.5	54.9	55.7	56.5	57.5	57.3	52.5	56.9	60.9	58.7	57.1
Non-Indigenous people Rate of Employment	63.4	63.4	61.7	61.7	61.8	61.9	62	61.6	61.6	61.3	61.8	62	62.4	58.2	60.6	61.9	62.2	61.2
Difference in Employment Rates																		
	5.2	3.9	5.1	8.3	6.7	5.6	5.7	5.1	6.7	5.6	5.3	4.5	5.1	5.7	3.7	1	3.5	4.1
Percent Change from Previous Year																		
Indigenous peoples		**2.2**	-4.9	-5.7	**3.2**	**2.2**	0.0	**0.4**	-2.8	**1.5**	**1.4**	**1.8**	-0.3	-8.4	**8.4**	7.0	-3.6	-2.7
Non-Indigenous people		0.0	-2.7	0.0	0.2	0.2	0.2	-0.6	0.0	-0.5	0.8	0.3	0.6	-6.7	4.1	2.1	0.5	-1.6

*** Bold indicates the years in which Indigenous peoples employment rates improved more than the Non-Indigenous peoples, from the previous year.**

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Participation Rate

The participation rate for the Indigenous population was 63.3% in 2024, which was a decrease from 64.4% in 2023, and from 66.1% in 2022. These were declines of 1.6% in 2024 compared to 2023 and 2.7% in 2023 compared to 2022. The participation rate for the non-Indigenous population was 65.4% in 2024, which was a decline from 65.6% in 2023, but slightly higher than in 2022, when it was 65.5%. These were marginal changes, with a decrease in 2024 of 0.5% from 2023, and an increase of 0.6% in 2023 from 2022. In 2024, the participation rate for the non-Indigenous population was higher than for Indigenous people by 2.1% and by 1.4% in 2023. However, in 2022, the participation rate for the Indigenous population was 0.8% higher than the non-Indigenous population. That was the only year since 2007 that the participation rate for the Indigenous population was higher than for the non-Indigenous population. In all the other years, the participation rate, as well as the unemployment and the employment rates, were more favourable for the non-Indigenous population. And unfortunately, the difference in each of these three rates has increased in 2023 and 2024.

TABLE 3
Participation Rate
15 Years and over - Living off reserves

	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
Indigenous peoples																		
Participation Rate	65.3	66.4	65.9	62.5	63.6	64.7	64.1	64	62.8	63.9	64	64.2	63.9	61	64.2	66.1	64.3	63.3
Non-Indigenous people																		
Participation Rate	67.5	67.6	67.3	67.1	66.9	66.7	66.7	66.2	66.1	65.8	66	65.8	66	64.4	65.4	65.3	65.7	65.4
Difference in Participation Rates																		
	2.2	1.2	1.4	4.6	3.3	2	2.6	2.2	3.3	1.9	2	1.6	2.1	3.4	1.2	-0.8	1.4	2.1
Percent Change from Previous Year																		
Indigenous peoples		**1.7**	-0.8	-5.2	**1.8**	**1.7**	-0.9	**-0.2**	-1.9	**1.8**	0.2	**0.3**	-0.5	-4.5	**5.2**	**3.0**	-2.7	-1.6
Non-Indigenous people		0.1	-0.4	-0.3	-0.3	-0.3	0.0	-0.7	-0.2	-0.5	0.3	-0.3	0.3	-2.4	1.6	-0.2	0.6	-0.5

*** Bold indicates the years in which Indigenous peoples participation rates improved more than the Non-Indigenous peoples, from the previous year.**

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Education and Unemployment Rates

Education is a key factor in the relationship with the unemployment, employment and participation rates. As educational levels increase, unemployment rates decrease for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous populations; that is, the higher the level of education, the lower the rate of unemployment. This has been the case every year since 2007 for each of the three educational levels of (1) less than high school, (2) high school graduate or some post-secondary, and (3) completed post-secondary education. Further, as educational levels increase, the difference in the unemployment rates between the Indigenous and non-Indigenous populations decreases, with only one exception since 2007, which was in 2020.

Unemployment rates increased in 2023 and 2024 for both the Indigenous and non-Indigenous populations for each of the three educational levels. For the Indigenous

population with less than high school completion, the unemployment rates in 2022, 2023 and 2024 were 15.2%, 16.7% and 21.4% respectively. For the non-Indigenous population, these rates were 10.8%, 11.2%, and 13.2%, for 2022, 2023 and 2024, respectively.

The unemployment rates in 2022, 2023 and 2024 for those with high school graduation or some post-secondary education for Indigenous people were 9.1%, 9.7% and 10.7% compared to 6.8%, 6.9% and 8.4% for the non-Indigenous. For those who completed post-secondary education, the unemployment rates in 2022, 2023, and 2024 for Indigenous people were 5.2%, 5.9%, and 6.5%. This compares to 4.1%, 4.3%, and 5.0% for the non-Indigenous unemployment rates for the same time periods.

Although the unemployment rate has decreased as educational levels increased, it has, nonetheless, been consistently higher for the Indigenous population for each of these three educational levels since 2007.

TABLE 4
Unemployment Rate by Educational Level
15 Years and over - Living off reserves

Educational attainment	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
Indigenous peoples																		
Total, all education levels	11	10.5	14.1	14.5	13.4	13	12.1	11.7	12.6	12.8	11.7	10.4	10.3	13.9	11.3	7.9	8.7	9.8
Less than high school 1	17.3	16.4	23.6	24.4	23.5	21.9	20.2	21.6	23.3	22.5	20	19.2	18.4	21.2	19.7	15.2	16.7	21.4
High school graduate or some post-secondary 2	9.8	9.9	14.1	14	13.5	13	11.9	12.1	12.4	13.6	12.4	11.7	11.9	15.8	13	9.1	9.7	10.7
Completed post-secondary education 3	8.1	7.4	9.2	9.9	8.5	8.7	8.7	7.7	8.5	8.5	8.4	6.9	6.8	10.6	8.2	5.2	5.9	6.5
Non-Indigenous people																		
Total, all education levels	6.1	6.2	8.3	8	7.5	7.3	7	6.9	6.8	6.9	6.3	5.7	5.6	9.5	7.4	5.3	5.4	6.3
Less than high school 1	12	11.9	15.8	15.7	15.3	14.6	14.3	13.8	13.4	13.5	12.2	11.1	10.8	16.1	13.7	10.8	11.2	13.2
High school graduate or some post-secondary 2	6.5	6.6	9.4	9	8.4	8.1	8.1	8	8.1	8.1	7.3	6.7	6.9	13	9.9	6.8	6.9	8.4
Completed post-secondary education 3	4.4	4.6	6.2	6	5.6	5.6	5.3	5.3	5.3	5.5	5.1	4.6	4.4	7.6	5.9	4.1	4.3	5
Difference in Unemployment Rates by Educational Attainment																		
Total, all education levels	4.9	4.3	5.8	6.5	5.9	5.7	5.1	4.8	5.8	5.9	5.4	4.7	4.7	4.4	3.9	2.6	3.3	3.5
Less than high school 1	5.3	4.5	7.8	8.7	8.2	7.3	5.9	7.8	9.9	9	7.8	8.1	7.6	5.1	6	4.4	5.5	8.2
High school graduate or some post-secondary 2	3.3	3.3	4.7	5	5.1	4.9	3.8	4.1	4.3	5.5	5.1	5	5	2.8	3.1	2.3	2.8	2.3
Completed post-secondary education 3	3.7	2.8	3	3.9	2.9	3.1	3.4	2.4	3.2	3	3.3	2.3	2.4	3	2.3	1.1	1.6	1.5

Footnotes:
1 Highest level obtained is some high school.
2 Highest level obtained is a high school degree or some post-secondary (in other words, worked toward, but did not complete, a degree, certificate [including a trade certificate] or diploma from an educational institution, including a university, beyond the secondary level).
3 Completed a certificate (including a trade certificate) or diploma from an educational institution beyond the secondary level. Also included are certificates below a Bachelor's degree obtained at a university and university degrees at the bachelor level or higher.

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Education and Employment Rates

As education levels increase, employment rates increase. This applies to each of the three educational levels, for each year since 2007, for both the Indigenous and non-Indigenous populations. When we compare employment rates by each of the three levels of education, the difference in the rates between the Indigenous and non-Indigenous populations is smaller than the overall differences. This was the case from 2007 to 2024 for those who completed post-secondary education. This was also the case for those who had some high school education, except in 2023. For those who were high school graduates or had some post-secondary education, it was the case from 2007 through 2021; however, it was not the case for them in 2022, 2023, or 2024. When education levels are considered, the differences in employment rates are narrower. In several cases, when examined by educational level, the employment rates are higher for Indigenous people than for non-Indigenous people. This is the case from 2017 through 2024 for high school graduates or those who had some post-secondary education.

TABLE 5
Employment Rate by Educational Level
15 Years and over - Living off reserves

Educational attainment	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
Indigenous peoples																		
Total, all education levels	58.2	59.5	56.6	53.4	55.1	56.3	56.3	56.5	54.9	55.7	56.5	57.5	57.3	52.5	56.9	60.9	58.7	57.1
Less than high school 1	37.8	39.9	34.6	31.8	32.2	35.2	34.2	32.1	31.9	32.9	31.8	32.8	31.3	30.5	31.4	36.6	33.9	28.9
High school graduate or some post-secondary 2	65.4	64.8	61	59.4	60.2	60.1	61.4	61.1	58.7	57.6	60.3	58.5	59.6	53.4	57.1	62.6	60.3	58.8
Completed post-secondary education 3	73.7	74.6	72.7	68.3	71	71.1	69.5	70.6	68.5	70.1	69.8	71.2	71	63.9	69.8	71	70.6	69.9
Non-Indigenous people																		
Total, all education levels	63.4	63.4	61.7	61.7	61.8	61.9	62	61.6	61.6	61.3	61.8	62	62.4	58.2	60.6	61.9	62.2	61.2
Less than high school 1	36.9	37.1	34.4	33.9	33.8	33.5	33.5	33	32.7	32.3	33.3	33.6	33.6	30	31.6	33	33.2	31.4
High school graduate or some post-secondary 2	65.1	64.6	61.6	61.6	61.4	61.2	60.8	59.9	58.8	58.5	58.9	58.1	57.9	52.3	54.3	56.5	56.3	54.5
Completed post-secondary education 3	74.2	74	72.9	72.6	72.4	72.2	72.3	71.8	71.8	71.2	71.2	71.3	71.5	67.5	69.6	70.4	70.5	69.9
Difference in Employment Rates by Educational Attainment																		
Total, all education levels	5.2	3.9	5.1	8.3	6.7	5.6	5.7	5.1	6.7	5.6	5.3	4.5	5.1	5.7	3.7	1	3.5	4.1
Less than high school 1	-0.9	-2.8	-0.2	2.1	1.6	-1.7	-0.7	0.9	0.8	-0.6	1.5	0.8	2.3	-0.5	0.2	-3.6	-0.7	2.5
High school graduate or some post-secondary 2	-0.3	-0.2	0.6	2.2	1.2	1.1	-0.6	-1.2	0.1	0.9	-1.4	-0.4	-1.7	-1.1	-2.8	-6.1	-4	-4.3
Completed post-secondary education 3	0.5	-0.6	0.2	4.3	1.4	1.1	2.8	1.2	3.3	1.1	1.4	0.1	0.5	3.6	-0.2	-0.6	-0.1	0

Footnotes:
1 Highest level obtained is some high school.
2 Highest level obtained is a high school degree or some post-secondary (in other words, worked toward, but did not complete, a degree, certificate [including a trade certificate] or diploma from an educational institution, including a university, beyond the secondary level).
3 Completed a certificate (including a trade certificate) or diploma from an educational institution beyond the secondary level. Also included are certificates below a Bachelor's degree obtained at a university and university degrees at the bachelor level or higher.

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Education and Participation Rates

Similarly to employment rates, as the level of education increases, participation rates increase. The participation rate has been higher for the non-Indigenous than the Indigenous

population every year since 2007, except for 2022. However, when participation rates are examined by level of education, the picture changes. The participation rates for the Indigenous population were higher for each comparable education level than for the non-Indigenous population from 2007 through 2024, except for four years, 2010, 2013, 2015 and 2020.

The reason for this is that a much larger percentage of the non-Indigenous population completed post-secondary education, and the higher the educational level, the greater the participation rate. This larger percentage results in the overall participation rate being higher for the non-Indigenous population. Nonetheless, it is significant that when we compare participation rates by level of education, the Indigenous population has higher participation rates.

TABLE 6
Participation Rate by Educational Level
15 Years and over - Living off reserves

Educational attainment	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
Indigenous peoples																		
Total, all education levels	65.3	66.4	65.9	62.5	63.6	64.7	64.1	64	62.8	63.9	64	64.2	63.9	61	64.2	66.1	64.3	63.3
Less than high school 1	45.7	47.7	45.3	42	42.1	45.1	42.9	40.9	41.5	42.5	39.8	40.6	38.3	38.7	39.1	43.1	40.7	36.7
High school graduate or some post-secondary 2	72.5	71.9	71	69.1	69.5	69.1	69.6	69.4	67	66.7	68.9	66.3	67.7	63.3	65.6	68.9	66.7	65.8
Completed post-secondary education 3	80.2	80.6	80.1	75.8	77.6	77.9	76.1	76.5	74.8	76.6	76.2	76.5	76.2	71.5	76	74.9	75	74.7
Non-Indigenous people																		
Total, all education levels	67.5	67.6	67.3	67.1	66.9	66.7	66.7	66.2	66.1	65.8	66	65.8	66	64.4	65.4	65.3	65.7	65.4
Less than high school 1	41.9	42.1	40.8	40.2	39.9	39.3	39.1	38.2	37.7	37.3	37.9	37.8	37.7	35.7	36.7	37.1	37.4	36.2
High school graduate or some post-secondary 2	69.6	69.2	68	67.7	67.1	66.6	66.1	65.1	64	63.6	63.5	62.3	62.2	60.1	60.2	60.6	60.5	59.5
Completed post-secondary education 3	77.6	77.6	77.8	77.3	76.7	76.5	76.4	75.8	75.8	75.3	75	74.8	74.8	73	74	73.4	73.6	73.6
Difference in Participation Rates by Educational Attainment																		
Total, all education levels	2.2	1.2	1.4	4.6	3.3	2	2.6	2.2	3.3	1.9	2	1.6	2.1	3.4	1.2	-0.8	1.4	2.1
Less than high school 1	-3.8	-5.6	-4.5	-1.8	-2.2	-5.8	-3.8	-2.7	-3.8	-5.2	-1.9	-2.8	-0.6	-3	-2.4	-6	-3.3	-0.5
High school graduate or some post-secondary 2	-2.9	-2.7	-3	-1.4	-2.4	-2.5	-3.5	-4.3	-3	-3.1	-5.4	-4	-5.5	-3.2	-5.4	-8.3	-6.2	-6.3
Completed post-secondary education 3	-2.6	-3	-2.3	1.5	-0.9	-1.4	0.3	-0.7	1	-1.3	-1.2	-1.7	-1.4	1.5	-2	-1.5	-1.4	-1.1

Footnotes:
1 Highest level obtained is some high school.
2 Highest level obtained is a high school degree or some post-secondary (in other words, worked toward, but did not complete, a degree, certificate [including a trade certificate] or diploma from an educational institution, including a university, beyond the secondary level).
3 Completed a certificate (including a trade certificate) or diploma from an educational institution beyond the secondary level. Also included are certificates below a Bachelor's degree obtained at a university and university degrees at the bachelor level or higher.

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Educational Levels by Population and Percentages

The non-Indigenous population has higher levels of formal education than the Indigenous population. In 2024, 22.8% of the Indigenous population had not completed high school, compared to 12.9% for non-Indigenous people. Nonetheless, these are significant increases in high school completion rates from 2007, when 36.6% of the Indigenous population did not complete high school compared to 22.1% of the non-

Indigenous population. The percent of non-Indigenous people who did not complete high school has declined each year since 2007. This has also been the case for the Indigenous population, except in three years, 2010, 2019 and 2023.

In a similar trend, the percentage of the non-Indigenous population that completed post-secondary education increased each year since 2007. This has also been the case for the Indigenous population, except in three years, 2010, 2015, and 2023.

There is a clear relationship between the level of education and improvements in the participation, employment and unemployment rates. However, these correlations do not mean causality. Nonetheless, given the clear and consistent relationship between education and employment measures, providing opportunities to individuals to increase their level of educational achievement would likely be beneficial to the individuals, the economy and society.

TABLE 7
Population and Percentages by Educational Level
15 Years and over - Living off reserves
Estimates in thousands, rounded to the nearest hundred.

Educational attainment		2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
	Persons in thousands																		
Indigenous peoples																			
Total, all education levels	#	639.1	673.3	707.3	741.3	777.5	821.8	866.9	911.7	956.6	997.6	1,024.40	1,050.10	1,075.90	1,101.60	1,128.30	1,157.00	1,187.20	1,218.40
Less than high school 1	#	233.7	237.5	233.8	249.3	252.7	265.3	262.8	263.3	274.1	284.2	281.4	264.2	275.5	269	265.8	257.9	279.4	278.3
Less than high school 1	**%**	**36.6**	**35.3**	**33.1**	**33.6**	**32.5**	**32.3**	**30.3**	**28.9**	**28.7**	**28.5**	**27.5**	**25.2**	**25.6**	**24.4**	**23.6**	**22.3**	**23.5**	**22.8**
High school graduate or some post-secondary 2	#	185.4	198.1	212	219	232.8	239.8	264.7	280.7	298.8	301	311.1	333.2	333.8	335.1	341.9	340.9	369.3	374.2
High school graduate or some post-secondary 2	**%**	**29.0**	**29.4**	**30.0**	**29.5**	**29.9**	**29.2**	**30.5**	**30.8**	**31.2**	**30.2**	**30.4**	**31.7**	**31.0**	**30.4**	**30.3**	**29.5**	**31.1**	**30.7**
Completed post-secondary education 3	#	220	237.7	261.6	272.9	292.1	316.7	339.4	367.8	383.7	412.4	431.9	452.7	466.6	497.5	520.6	558.3	538.5	565.9
Completed post-secondary education 3	**%**	**34.4**	**35.3**	**37.0**	**36.8**	**37.6**	**38.5**	**39.2**	**40.3**	**40.1**	**41.3**	**42.2**	**43.1**	**43.4**	**45.2**	**46.1**	**48.3**	**45.4**	**46.4**
Non-Indigenous people																			
Total, all education levels	#	25,829.90	26,157.90	26,501.60	26,835.50	27,125.70	27,407.20	27,675.70	27,920.10	28,109.70	28,385.80	28,737.00	29,155.30	29,558.40	29,973.10	30,201.30	30,664.00	31,482.50	32,600.80
Less than high school 1	#	5,716.00	5,630.90	5,543.40	5,391.00	5,274.30	5,202.60	5,046.60	4,925.50	4,803.90	4,749.90	4,585.40	4,446.80	4,406.00	4,227.80	4,103.40	4,155.90	4,134.30	4,213.70
Less than high school 1	**%**	**22.1**	**21.5**	**20.9**	**20.1**	**19.4**	**19.0**	**18.2**	**17.6**	**17.1**	**16.7**	**16.0**	**15.3**	**14.9**	**14.1**	**13.6**	**13.6**	**13.1**	**12.9**
High school graduate or some post-secondary 2	#	7,191.60	7,332.10	7,470.90	7,497.50	7,528.40	7,500.80	7,656.50	7,772.70	7,647.30	7,599.70	7,754.10	7,831.60	7,624.70	7,811.10	7,664.30	7,560.90	7,648.00	7,814.10
High school graduate or some post-secondary 2	**%**	**27.8**	**28.0**	**28.2**	**27.9**	**27.8**	**27.4**	**27.7**	**27.8**	**27.2**	**26.8**	**27.0**	**26.9**	**25.8**	**26.1**	**25.4**	**24.7**	**24.3**	**24.0**
Completed post-secondary education 3	#	12,922.30	13,194.90	13,487.20	13,947.00	14,323.00	14,703.80	14,972.70	15,221.90	15,658.50	16,036.20	16,397.50	16,876.90	17,527.80	17,934.20	18,433.60	18,947.20	19,700.10	20,573.00
Completed post-secondary education 3	**%**	**50.0**	**50.4**	**50.9**	**52.0**	**52.8**	**53.6**	**54.1**	**54.5**	**55.7**	**56.5**	**57.1**	**57.9**	**59.3**	**59.8**	**61.0**	**61.8**	**62.6**	**63.1**

Footnotes:
1 Highest level obtained is some high school.
2 Highest level obtained is a high school degree or some post-secondary (in other words, worked toward, but did not complete, a degree, certificate [including a trade certificate] or diploma from an educational institution, including a university, beyond the secondary level).
3 Completed a certificate (including a trade certificate) or diploma from an educational institution beyond the secondary level. Also included are certificates below a Bachelor's degree obtained at a university and university degrees at the bachelor level or higher.

Statistics Canada. Table 14-10-0359-01 Labour force characteristics by Indigenous group living off reserve and educational attainment (x 1,000)
https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/t1/tbl1/en/tv.action?pid=1410035901

Summary

The unemployment rate has been higher for the Indigenous population than the non-Indigenous population every year since 2007. The unemployment rate increased in 2023 and 2024 for both the Indigenous and non-Indigenous populations.

The employment and participation rates were lower for the Indigenous population than the non-Indigenous population for every year since 2007, except in 2022, when the participation rate was higher for Indigenous people. In 2023 and 2024, the employment and participation rates decreased for the Indigenous population. Both these rates increased for the non-Indigenous population in 2023 but decreased in 2024.

As educational levels increase, unemployment rates decrease, employment rates increase, and participation rates increase for both the Indigenous and non-Indigenous populations. This has been the case for each year since 2007. Further, as educational levels increase, the difference in the unemployment rates between the Indigenous and non-Indigenous populations decrease. These findings are highly significant, as it shows the relationships between the educational level achieved and the measures of employment

Lower unemployment rates and higher employment and participation rates are an indication of how well an economy is doing. The data reported here shows a clear relationship between education and the three key employment measures; however, it does not demonstrate a causal relationship. Nonetheless, based upon these results, a more educated population will be better off from an employment perspective. Given this, it seems reasonable for families, communities, society and governments to work to ensure that as many people as possible are provided with the support and opportunities to achieve as high a level of education that they would seek to obtain.

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Statistics Canada, Labour Force Survey, Table: 14-10-0365-01 Labour force characteristics by Indigenous group and educational attainment

https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/t1/tbl1/en/tv.action?pid=1410035901

https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/t1/tbl1/en/tv.action?pid=1410036101

https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/t1/tbl1/en/tv.action?pid=1410037001

Self-Employment Trends Among First Nations, Métis, and Inuit (2001–2021)

Tasha Brooks

ABSTRACT

This article explores self-employment trends among Indigenous Peoples in Canada between 2001 and 2021, focusing on 2016 onward. Using disaggregated data (i.e., data separated by First Nations, Métis, and Inuit identity) from Statistics Canada's Census of Population, it examines changes in both self-employment rates and absolute numbers, revealing distinct patterns across Indigenous groups. The analysis finds that while Métis individuals consistently report the highest self-employment rates, First Nations, despite notable growth, continue to face structural barriers, particularly those imposed by the Indian Act. Inuit remain significantly underrepresented in self-employment. The article also draws attention to the underutilization of external business assistance: in 2017, 88% of self-employed First Nations, 72% of self-employed Inuit, and 91% of self-employed Métis reported receiving no outside support. These findings underscore the importance of disaggregated data and call for targeted funding models that reflect the diverse conditions shaping Indigenous self-employment in Canada.

Self-employment has long played an important role in Canada's economy, offering an alternative to wage employment while fostering innovation, resilience, and local economic growth. For Indigenous Peoples, First Nations, Métis, and Inuit, self-employment also represents a pathway to economic independence, cultural continuity, and strengthened community economies (Tamtik, 2020). Understanding trends in Indigenous self-employment and the impact of access to capital, such as NACCA loan distributions, is essential for informing public policy and shaping support programs to reduce persistent economic disparities (Fortin-Lefebvre & Baba, 2020).

Indigenous Peoples in Canada have historically encountered structural barriers to full participation in the economy, including limited access to financing, education, and commercial infrastructure (Penner, 2022). Despite these constraints, the number of Indigenous entrepreneurs has grown over the past two decades, both in rates of self-employment and levels of formal business ownership (Gueye, 2024). While much of the existing literature focuses on community-owned enterprises and the broader theorizing of Indigenous economic development (Colbourne et al., 2023; Henriques et al., 2020), the self-employment experiences of individual Indigenous people remain largely understudied. Advancing this line of research requires disaggregated data that distinguish between First Nations, Métis, and Inuit peoples, as each group faces unique historical, policy, and market conditions that shape their entrepreneurial opportunities. In this article, I use Statistics Canada's self-employment data as a proxy for individual-level entrepreneurship. While self-employment is a practical statistical measure, it does not capture all forms of entrepreneurship identified in the literature, such as informal business activity or innovation-driven enterprise. However, this approach is consistent with existing national datasets and allows for longitudinal and group-based comparisons.

This article examines trends in Indigenous self-employment and business ownership from 2001 to 2021, with particular attention to changes since 2016. Using census data from Statistics Canada and comparative findings from administrative business data, it presents a descriptive analysis of both self-employment rates and absolute counts. The analysis also explores access to capital, underutilization of external support, and these patterns' implications for future economic development policy and Indigenous-led funding models.

Data Source and Methodology

Data for this analysis were sourced from Statistics Canada's Indigenous Population Profile, drawn from the 2001, 2006, 2011, 2016, and 2021 Censuses of Population. The 2011 data come from the voluntary National Household Survey rather than a mandatory Census, which may affect comparability, but the results remain the official Statistics Canada source for that year. The self-employment figures reflect individual-level reporting of worker status class for First Nations, Métis, Inuit, and non-Indigenous populations. This approach differs from Gueye's (2024) Indigenous-Owned Businesses in Canada, 2005 to 2021 Statistics Canada report, which draws on data from Canadian Employer–Employee Dynamics Database (CEEDD) studies, which identify Indigenous business ownership through administrative tax records and imputation and focuses on business entities rather than individuals. The use of census data enables consistent trend analysis over time and captures socio-economic shifts, including those related to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Trends Analysis

Indigenous Population Trends

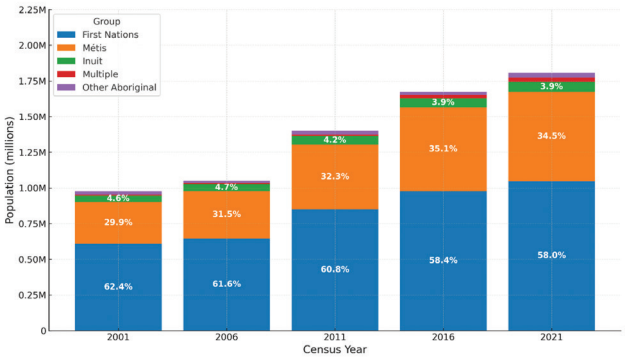
Understanding self-employment trends among Indigenous Peoples requires situating

them within the broader demographic context. As shown in Figure 1, First Nations people have consistently comprised the majority of the Indigenous population in Canada over the past two decades, accounting for approximately 58% in 2021. At 34.5%, Métis represent the second-largest group, while Inuit remain the smallest group at around 3.9%. These proportions have remained relatively stable across census years, though all three populations have experienced absolute growth.

Between 2001 and 2021, the Indigenous population in Canada grew at a faster rate than the non-Indigenous population (Statistics Canada, 2001b; Statistics Canada, n.d.). This growth affects labour force participation, service demand, and entrepreneurial activity, highlighting the need to analyze First Nations, Métis, and Inuit populations separately. For example, First Nations and Inuit communities often face greater challenges in health, education, and employment outcomes, including significantly lower postsecondary attainment (45.3% and 33.6%, respectively, compared to 56.3% among Métis and 68.0% among non Indigenous people) (Melvin, 2023). Employment outcomes show a similar divergence: while the overall Indigenous employment rate sits around 50%, a 7-point gap relative to 57% among non-Indigenous Canadians, First Nations on reserve experience a much wider gap, with employment rates nearly 20% lower, whereas Métis participation rates exceed those of non Indigenous people (NIEDB, 2024).

Interpreting self-employment data requires considering both absolute numbers and population proportions. An increase in the total number of Indigenous entrepreneurs is an important achievement, yet if it occurs alongside rapid population growth, it may not translate into a higher self-employment rate. In other words, rates can remain stable, or even appear stagnant, even when more individuals are entering self-employment. Figure 1 provides a foundation for understanding how both population size and the composition of the Indigenous population by identity group shape the interpretation of Indigenous economic participation, a theme explored further in the paper.

FIGURE 1
Indigenous Population by Group (2001-2021)



Note. Chart data are from Statistics Canada (2001a; 2003, 2006; 2011; 2016; 2021).

Breakdown by Group

First Nations. As the largest Indigenous group in Canada, First Nations people make up approximately 58% of the total Indigenous population. Despite their demographic weight, First Nations have consistently reported lower self-employment rates compared to Métis and the non-Indigenous population. The self-employment rate for First Nations was 5.6% in 2001, 6.2% in 2006, 6.7% in 2011, 6.1% in 2016, and 8.0% in 2021. In absolute terms, this represented 12,625 entrepreneurs in 2001, 15,254 in 2006, 19,235 in 2011, 22,455 in 2016, and 33,920 in 2021. Despite this growth, rates remained well below the national average throughout the period. This persistent gap likely reflects historical and ongoing systemic barriers tied to the Indian Act, including limited access to capital, education, and business infrastructure, particularly for individuals living on reserve (Pinto & Blue, 2017).

Métis. Métis people account for approximately 34.5% of the Indigenous population in Canada, making them the second-largest group after First Nations. They consistently report the highest self-employment rates among Indigenous groups. The Métis self-employment rate was 8.9% in 2001, 9.3% in 2006, 12.6% in 2011, 9.6% in 2016, and 11.7% in 2021. Métis entrepreneurs numbered 12,700 in 2001, 16,905 in 2006, 21,605 in 2011, 28,880 in 2016, and 37,615 in 2021. This trend may reflect comparatively greater urban residence and increased engagement in high school completion, despite Métis being less likely to access capital through Indigenous federal funding (Big River Analytics, 2025; Layton, 2025).

Unlike First Nations people, who are subject to the Indian Act with limitations on land use, taxation, and access to capital, Métis individuals are not constrained by these statutory restrictions, reducing structural barriers to business formation and growth. In addition, Métis entrepreneurs contribute disproportionately to Indigenous economic output, accounting for nearly 44% of total Indigenous GDP, despite representing only about 35% of the Indigenous population (Chernoff & Chung, 2023). This economic prominence may help explain why Métis communities consistently report higher rates of self-employment than First Nations and Inuit groups, even when adjusting for population size.

Inuit. Inuit represent approximately 3.9% of the total Indigenous population in Canada, making them the smallest of the three constitutionally recognized groups. Among Inuit, the self-employment rate was 4.7% in 2001, 3.4% in 2006, 4.4% in 2011, 3.9% in 2016, and 4.0% in 2021. This equated to 815 Inuit entrepreneurs in 2001, 630 in 2006, 770 in 2011, 980 in 2016, and 1,095 in 2021. Inuit rates and absolute numbers remained comparatively low and stable over time. This relatively flat trend contrasts with the gradual upward movement among First Nations and Métis populations.

The lower self-employment rate among Inuit likely reflects structural barriers shaped by the geographic and socioeconomic realities of northern communities. Remoteness, extreme climate conditions, and limited transportation infrastructure contribute to high costs of living and doing business, while small local markets and constrained economic opportunities reduce the viability of traditional entrepreneurship. Research on Inuit social determinants highlights how these geographic and structural conditions, such

as isolation, high costs, and underdeveloped infrastructure, affect multiple aspects of life in Inuit Nunangat, and these same factors create unique economic challenges that generalized business supports do not fully address (Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami, 2014).

Overall Indigenous Self-Employment Trends

From 2001 to 2021, the self-employment rate among the Indigenous population rose from 7.2% to 9.9%, narrowing the long-standing gap with the non-Indigenous population, which increased from 11.7% to 14.1% over the same period (as depicted in Table 1). In the Census, the self-employment rate refers to the proportion of the employed population (wage employees plus self-employed) aged 15 years and older who are classified as self-employed, with individuals counted in only one category. In 2001, the Indigenous rate (7.2%) was substantially lower than the non-Indigenous rate (11.7%), reflecting structural barriers to entrepreneurship, including limited access to capital, training, and markets.

Over the following decade, the Indigenous self-employment rate remained flat at 6.6% in both 2006 and 2011, while the non-Indigenous rate declined from 13.5% in 2006 to 11.3% in 2011. And in 2011, the Métis self-employment rate reached 12.6%, surpassing the non-Indigenous rate (11.3%) for the first time. That said, a decline occurred in 2016, with the overall Indigenous rate falling slightly to 7.2%, while the non-Indigenous rate stood at 12.0%. This dip may reflect tightening labour markets, decreased capital support, shifts in employment structures, or changing census response patterns. Between 2016 and 2021, however, Indigenous self-employment rose from 7.2% to 9.9%, while the non-Indigenous rate also increased, from 12.0% to 14.1% (consult Table 1). Although the absolute gains were similar (2.7 percentage points for Indigenous and 2.1 for non-Indigenous), the Indigenous increase represents a proportionally larger rise (+37.5% compared to +17.5%). This rebound was particularly strong among First Nations, whose rate rose from 6.1% to 8.0%, and Métis, from 9.6% to 11.7%. Inuit self-employment remained comparatively flat at around 4.0%. This pattern suggests that both Indigenous and non-Indigenous populations turned to self-employment during the pandemic period, likely in response to job loss, underemployment, or gaps in wage labour opportunities. In contrast, the non-Indigenous rate remained relatively stable, further closing the historic gap between the two populations.

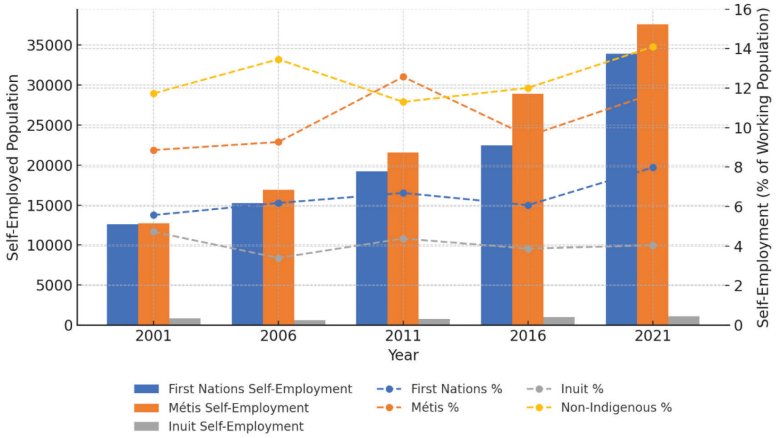
TABLE 1
Self-Employment Rates

	2001	2006	2011	2016	2021
First Nations	5.6%	6.2%	6.7%	6.1%	8.5%
Metis	8.9%	9.3%	12.6%	9.6%	11.7%
Inuit	4.7%	3.4%	4.4%	3.9%	4%
Indigenous	7.2%	6.6%	6.6%	7.2%	9.9%
Non-Indigenous	11.7%	13.5%	11.3%	12%	14.1%

Note. Table data are from Statistics Canada (2001b; 2006; 2011; 2016; 2021)..

To better understand this shift, it is helpful to examine not only self-employment rates but also the absolute number of Indigenous self-employed individuals over time. As shown in Figure 2, between 2001 and 2021 all three Indigenous groups experienced growth in the number of entrepreneurs, with especially sharp increases in the last census period. First Nations saw a substantial rise in absolute terms, nearly doubling the number of entrepreneurs between 2016 and 2021.

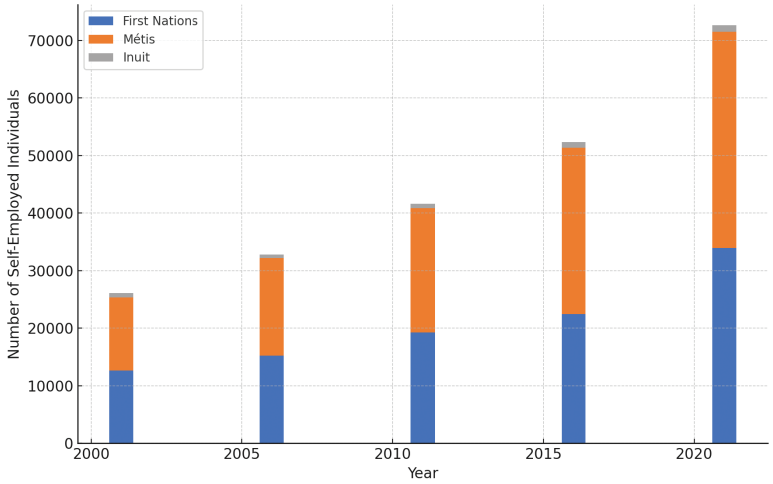
FIGURE 2
Indigenous Self-Employment: Absolute Population and Percentage of Working Population



Note. Chart data are from Statistics Canada (2001b; 2006; 2011; 2016; 2021).

Figure 3 illustrates that while all three grouped showed numeric growth in self-employment, the rate of increase among First Nations between 2016-2021 is proportionally higher than previous periods, signalling a potential shift in self-employment engagement following expanded NACCA loans. This pattern becomes clearer when comparing absolute self-employment counts by identity groups. While Métis continue to represent the largest number of self-employed Indigenous Peoples, the Inuit number remains low and relatively stable, reincforcing the need to interpret self-employment trends within the identity populations, rather than overall Indigenous self-employment growth alone.

FIGURE 3
Number of Indigenous Self-Employed by Group (2001-2021)



Note. Chart data are from Statistics Canada (2001b; 2006; 2011; 2016; 2021)..

While individual-level self-employment rates rose sharply between 2016 and 2021, particularly among First Nations and Métis, business registry data tell a more complex story. According to Gueye (2024), the number of Indigenous-owned businesses increased by 42.7% between 2005 and 2021, with most of that growth occurring prior to 2018. After peaking in 2018, Indigenous-owned businesses declined by 0.6% in 2019 and by 2.2% in 2021. In contrast, non-Indigenous-owned businesses continued to grow through 2020, increasing by 50% since 2005. This divergence suggests that while more Indigenous individuals turned to self-employment during the pandemic, this did not always translate into formalized business ownership, possibly due to resource constraints or informal economic activity. Recent analyses of labour market outcomes among Indigenous people living off-reserve during the pandemic show similar disruptions and uneven recovery patters (Lamb, 2024). Because the Census classifies individuals

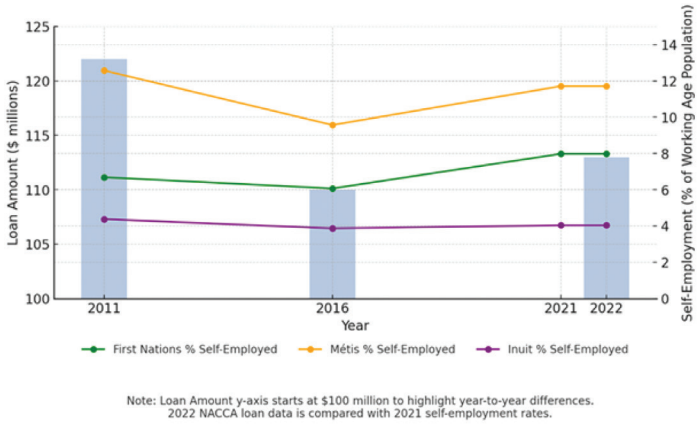
as self-employed only when it is their primary job during the reference week, while registry data include all incorporated Indigenous-owned enterprises regardless of the owner's main income source, the two measures are not strictly comparable. Nonetheless, Gueye's findings remain consistent with the disaggregated self-employment data presented in this article: Métis continue to hold the largest share of Indigenous-owned businesses, followed by First Nations, and then Inuit. This reinforces the importance of disaggregation, as each group demonstrates distinct levels of engagement and growth trajectories in both self-employment and registered enterprise formation.

Access to Capital and Entrepreneurial Support

A critical factor influencing self-employment trends among Indigenous Peoples is access to start-up and operating capital. The National Aboriginal Capital Corporations Association (NACCA), a national organization representing over 50 Indigenous Financial Institutions (IFIs), plays a central role in facilitating this access. NACCA provides financial and business support to First Nations, Métis, and Inuit entrepreneurs for both start-up and expansion purposes. Their investments are often the only source of commercial financing available to Indigenous individuals, particularly in rural or on-reserve communities where mainstream lenders remain limited or inaccessible.

As shown in Figure 4, fluctuations in NACCA loan disbursements align with shifts in self-employment trends. With lower capital availability in 2016, a corresponding dip in Indigenous self-employment rates occurred, and a sharp rebound in both loan activity and self-employment were found in 2020 and 2021. Capital injection points appear to function as catalysts to self-employment, suggesting that self-employment is responsive to capital availability, rather than soley driven by other factors alone.

FIGURE 4
NACCA Loan Disbursements and Indigenous Self-Employment Rates



Note. Chart data are from NACCA (2012; 2017; 2023) and Statistics Canada (2001b; 2006; 2011; 2016; 2021).

Loan disbursement data from NACCA reveal important patterns. In 2011, NACCA distributed over $122 million in loans (NACCA, 2012), coinciding with one of the highest observed self-employment rates in the Indigenous population. Funding dropped to $110 million in 2016, aligning with a corresponding decline in self-employment that year (NACCA, 2017). By 2022, loans had rebounded to $113 million, and in 2021 alone, NACCA distributed an additional $160 million in COVID-19 relief funding to Indigenous businesses (NACCA, 2023).

To illustrate this connection more clearly, Figure 4 also includes the 2011, 2016, and 2021 self-employment numbers across the three identity groups. In 2011, the number of self-employed individuals was 19,235 for First Nations (6.69%), 21,605 for Métis (12.57%), and 770 for Inuit (4.38%). By 2016, these figures stood at 20,510 for First Nations (6.06%), 28,880 for Métis (9.58%), and 980 for Inuit (3.94%). By 2021, they rose to 33,920 for First Nations (7.98%), 37,615 for Métis (11.71%), and 1,095 for Inuit (4.04%) (Gueye, 2024). This more complete trend shows that while NACCA's capital support dipped in 2016, Indigenous self-employment also fell, but both rebounded strongly by 2021. The surge in financing and targeted COVID-19 supports may partially explain why Indigenous self-employment rose during this difficult period, despite the broader economic challenges caused by the pandemic.

Importantly, Gueye's (2024) analysis highlights a different dimension: although Indigenous-owned, registered businesses grew significantly from 2005 to 2017, they began to decline after 2018. This decline does not contradict rising self-employment rates but instead suggests a decoupling between entrepreneurial activity and formal business registration. Many individuals may have turned to informal or sole-proprietor self-employment, which is captured in census data but not in registry counts. Together, these findings underscore that increases in individual self-employment during the pandemic did not always translate into sustainable or incorporated business ownership.

This divergence highlights the need for more accessible financing, regulatory reform, and culturally grounded business supports that allow Indigenous entrepreneurs not only to start but to sustain and grow formal enterprises.

Underutilization of External Support

Data from the 2017 Aboriginal Peoples Survey reveal that 88% of self-employed First Nations, 72% of self-emplolyed Inuit, and 91% of self-employed Métis did not receive any form of external business assistance (Statistics Canada, 2017). This includes support from Indigenous, federal, provincial, or municipal sources. These figures suggest not only underutilization but a broader disconnect between available supports and the realities faced by Indigenous business owners.

The amount of funding that NACCA provides to entrepreneurs decreased from 2011-2022 and the absolute number of self-employed Indigenous people has risen in Canada. This decrease in funds means that the average per capita dollar amount per self-employed Indigenous person has also decreased. That is, the same financial support available to entrepreneurs in 2011 does not exist in today's dollars.

While some entrepreneurs may intentionally choose to operate independently, the scale of non-engagement may reflect systemic issues, such as limited awareness of programs, lack of culturally relevant delivery, historic distrust of institutions, or barriers tied to application complexity or eligibility (Brooks, 2024). This information highlights the need for rethinking how entrepreneurial support is designed and delivered, shifting toward Indigenous-led, locally grounded institutions that can build relationships, reduce barriers, and deliver support in ways that reflect the cultural, geographic, and policy contexts of the communities they serve.

Discussion

While there has been growth in self-employment among all groups, the data indicate that rates and sustainability vary. The findings presented in this article highlight the importance of disaggregating Indigenous data by identity group. Aggregated figures can obscure significant differences in entrepreneurial activity between First Nations, Métis, and Inuit populations. While overall self-employment rates among Indigenous Peoples have improved over time, these improvements have not been evenly distributed. Métis individuals consistently report higher self-employment rates than both First Nations and Inuit, while Inuit remain underrepresented in entrepreneurship despite population growth. Each group faces distinct historical, geographic, and policy contexts that shape their access to capital, markets, and infrastructure. These legal and institutional barriers continue to limit the ability of many First Nations individuals to access mainstream financing or participate fully in the entrepreneurial economy.

Without disaggregation, policy responses risk being overgeneralized, failing to recognize these structurally imposed barriers. Disaggregated analysis not only reveals these distinctions but also supports more targeted and equitable investments. Initiatives such as those led by NACCA and its network of IFIs should be assessed not only in terms of overall reach but also their accessibility and relevance to each Indigenous population. If self-employment trends are to guide policy and programming, they should reflect the diversity of Indigenous lived experiences and economic realities.

These findings point to the need for targeted funding models and policy frameworks that account for the unique barriers experienced by each Indigenous group. A one-size-fits-all approach to entrepreneurship support risks reinforcing structural inequities rather than resolving them. Tailored programs that consider legislative constraints, geographic realities, and cultural contexts are critical for fostering equitable access to self-employment opportunities across First Nations, Métis, and Inuit populations. Early program evaluations (Oppenheimer et al., 2001) highlight the importance of locally delivered training and accessible financing for Indigenous entrepreneurs. While these foundational elements remain important, contemporary research and practice show that broader structural factors, including access to capital at scale, distinctions-based supports, and policy reform are increasingly central to advancing Indigenous entrepreneurship.

Conclusion

Between 2001 and 2021, Indigenous self-employment rates have risen steadily, narrowing a long-standing gap with the non-Indigenous population. Métis consistently report the highest rates, while Inuit remain underrepresented. First Nations, despite notable growth, continue to face structural barriers linked to the Indian Act. Access to capital, particularly through NACCA, appears to correspond with key inflection points in growth. However, 2017 data show that the vast majority of Indigenous entrepreneurs (88% of First Nations and 91% of Métis) did not access external business assistance. These findings highlight the need for disaggregated data and tailored funding models that address group-specific barriers to entrepreneurship.

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Introduction

Warren Weir

In this section, Dr. Mary Beth Doucette reviews the book *North of Nowhere: Song of a Truth and Reconciliation Commissioner*, written by, and about, Marie Wilson (2024, House of Anansi Press, Toronto, Ontario).

In her book, Wilson offers an insightful firsthand critique of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's important work. I strongly believe this book should be recommended (or even essential) reading for all Canadians, including those involved globally in Indigenous and non-Indigenous reconciliation.

In her review, Doucette discusses her interest in the Indigenous Residential Schools Settlement Agreement (IRSSA, or Settlement Agreement) and questions how the findings of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) might influence the work that Economic Development Officers (EDOs) do in, with, and for Indigenous communities and organizations. She also expresses her ongoing interest in how the TRC was organized and how Indigenous ways of knowing and being were embedded into the TRC process and public hearings.

Book Review: North of Nowhere: Song of a Truth and Reconciliation Commissioner

Mary Beth Doucette

Wilson, M. (2024). *North of nowhere: Song of a Truth and Reconciliation commissioner*. House of Anansi Press.

North of Nowhere: Song of a Truth and Reconciliation Commissioner, written by former TRC commissioner Marie Wilson, is not specifically about Indigenous-led economic development, but the TRC's impact on economic development has been significant. I read the book because I wanted to understand how the commissioners, as project administrators, navigated the seemingly impossible five-year mandate that was part of the Indian Residential School Settlement Agreement (IRSSA).

I've been following public and administrative responses to the TRC since its conclusion on December 18, 2015. There is something unusually compelling and resonant about the Calls to Action, which led me to learn more about the Mandate, the IRSSA's administrative processes, and the TRC's deliverables. By multiple accounts, the TRC was a success. It not only delivered the mandate on time (excepting some minor extensions) but also on budget, leveraging goodwill to amplify its message. It makes me wonder why it succeeded and why so many other commissions and inquiries failed.

I chose to review this book for *JAED* on the heels of editing the special issue of Two-Eyed Seeing. As a teacher, I have witnessed Two-Eyed Seeing become synonymous with truth and reconciliation. As a Mi'kmaw, a seventh-generation settler, and a Canadian scholar of Indigenous-led economic development and reconciliation, I'm constantly thinking about perspectives, placement, positionality, and values. I read the book because I am eager to learn from the commissioners. What administrative lessons can project managers—who often have five years or less to complete seemingly impossible projects with limited resources and carefully controlled budgets—learn

from the commissioners? How did the commissioners leverage community goodwill and support communities' needs?

I was fascinated to read about the commissioners' choices and struggles and how they learned from their missteps. I was also intrigued by the ways the TRC infused their process with ceremony, especially since these ceremonies were not part of their mandate. By doing so, the commissioners and their networks were modelling reconciliation and learning throughout the process.

North of Nowhere was published a decade after the TRC's official mandate ended. Yet Wilson describes the book as part of her commitment, as a commissioner, to continue to raise awareness about Indian Residential Schools' and state-funded institutions' ongoing impacts on Indigenous communities and Canadians: she views the book as part of her ongoing contribution to reconciliation. In the book, Wilson reflects on her firsthand experiences as the lone non-Indigenous and female commissioner. It is a thoughtfully constructed compilation in which she highlights and uplifts the words and experiences of the survivors who attended TRC events from coast to coast to coast. With her heartfelt memories and anecdotes, Wilson reflects on her personal story while still centring the survivors' stories.

Wilson's words are carefully chosen to highlight a sense of relationship with, and responsibility to, the people who entrusted her with their stories. The book was deliberately structured to convey the impression of a unified journey while still honouring the uniqueness of everyone's story, shared in ways that honour the place, time, and emotions expressed. For example, the book is organized in seven sections that mirror the seven sacred teachings embraced and activated by the TRC processes: respect, courage, love, truth, humility, honesty, and wisdom. At the events I attended, Wilson asked the audience to be attentive to the traumas disclosed. As adults, she explained, we can read through tragedy—although she tempers this tragedy by ending each chapter on a hopeful note.

Even though I have been working in the field and with communities for most of my career, reading this book reminded me of how much healing is still required. In business, there is a tendency to rush to meet deadlines, a rush that is mirrored in the desire to move forward and complete the calls to action. This book is a gentle reminder of the time that was stolen and the time that will be needed to heal.

For Economic Development Officers, the book is a reminder of the ties that bind us as a network nationally. And it is a reminder of regional dynamics, where we are tied, politically and socially, to the histories and economic development efforts of others.

For educators in business administration, *North of Nowhere* is a reminder to be considerate of the personal lives of partners, employees, and students. It is a reminder that students and colleagues are their own people, often dealing with grief, healing, and systems that were never designed to support them.

Finally, for students, *North of Nowhere* is a chance to learn from and about the past, as well as an introduction to potential futures. It highlights the interconnections between policy, organizations, people, and communities—past, present, and future.

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