Canada's Agenda 2030 National Strategy: First Nations in northern Ontario Consultation

April 30, 2019

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Consultation with First Nations peoples in northern Ontario regarding the development of Canada's 2030 Agenda National Strategy revealed distinct regional and cultural considerations. The unique findings of these discussions highlighted the need for a bottom-up, contextually-based approach to Strategy development. As Canada joins the collective effort towards achieving the 2030 objectives through the creation of a national strategy; it must do so in conjunction with the ongoing national dialogue and work towards truth and reconciliation.

The learning and discussions that are reflected throughout this report took place at both the regional and First Nation level. While discussions formally relating to Sustainable Development Goals, Canada's 2030 Agenda National Strategy and the Ontario Council for International Cooperation took place in March and April 2019, they were based in years of partnership and relationship between individuals at +city lab, Eabametoong First Nation and Nishnawbe Aski Nation. Learnings from throughout the span of these relationships will be drawn on to provide context and understanding throughout this report. Previous learning is used to complement findings, but also to demonstrate the relationships required to undertake such work in a meaningful way. The conversations which inform the following recommendations would not have been possible without pre-existing relationship; a finding in itself which should guide further development.

Project Description

+city lab partnered with Ontario Council for International Cooperation (OCIC) to lead consultations with Indigenous peoples in Ontario to contribute to Strength in Diversity & Partnership: Community Perspectives on a National SDG Strategy. The aim of consultation was to increase understanding of Agenda 2030 and Sustainable Development Goals while exploring how participants could engage with, and benefit from, the development of Canada's Agenda 2030 National Strategy.

Given the extremely short timeline for consultation, it is not possible to present the breadth and diversity of Indigenous voices in Ontario in this report. Resulting from existing +city lab partnerships, focus was placed on First Nations peoples living in remote and isolated First Nations in northern Ontario. Consultation took place primarily during two community visits which were both attended by +city lab and OCIC:

1. Nishnawbe Aski Nation Environment, Energy and Climate Change symposium held in Thunder Bay on March 26-27, 2019 where project team jointly hosted sessions with NAN's Housing and Infrastructure department and were invited to attend other sessions;
2. A community visit to Eabametoong First Nation from April 3-5, 2019 where the project team was invited to meet with all community members.

In total, across these events the voices of more than 75 people were captured and will be reflected in this report.

As a result of +city lab 's focus on housing and community development many conversations began from this perspective. However, working from the framework that the home is the centre of the physical, social and psychological lives of its occupants, conversations extended beyond the traditional disciplinary boundaries of housing. Learnings occurred across, and beyond, Agenda 2030's 17 Goals; reflecting the fears, goals and aspirations of participants for their communities with regards to sustainable development and the development of Canada's National Strategy.

Who We Are

+city lab, founded in 2012 by Shelagh McCartney is committed to experimental research and design practice to explore platforms that focus on contemporary approaches to city and open territory design due to rapid urbanization.

The +city lab work engages intersections of architecture, landscape and urbanism and the new urban conditions that are resulting from expanded populations, new technologies and economies, at various scales. Seeking to nurture both built and unbuilt work through scholarly and applied research +city lab uses design and planning as a research vehicle to pose and explore alternative urbanisms that address the broader context of a project. Recent work and research focus on the key topics of morphology, informality, limits, inclusion, sustainability, and transformation.

As a platform to promote and facilitate interdisciplinary research, +city lab also seeks to nurture opportunities for collaborative work. The lab undertakes research projects and supports advanced student work, the lab offers studios, courses, builds shared databases, and generates public forums and publications.

A priority and focus of +city lab's work is on-reserve housing system change in northern Ontario. Working in partnership with First Nations, Tribal Councils and Political Territorial Organizations +city lab uses their immersive and interactive approach to community engagement to uncover solutions to the longstanding housing and well-being outcomes gaps faced by First Nations peoples living on-reserve. In particular, this work has focused on creating appropriate, culturally-based solutions across the housing system including design, governance and evaluation.

+city lab first became involved with the SDG discussion through an invitation to the Waterloo Global Science Initiative April 22-25, 2018. Dr. McCartney attended the conference along with Eabametoong First Nation Councilor Wanda Sugarhead and Housing Manager Ron Missewace.

EABAMETOONG FIRST NATION

Eabametoong First Nation is located on Eabamet Lake in northern Ontario. It is a community accessible only by air and winter ice road, and lies 360 kilometers north of Thunder Bay. The membership of Eabametoong includes 2,647 band members with 1,531 currently living in the community. The community in its current location dates to the 1960s when the settlement was forcibly established. Located across Eabamet Lake from former Hudson's Bay Company trading post, the current community, then called Fort Hope 64, became the home of families who were still living traditionally in many nearby areas of the Albany River watershed.

Eabametoong First Nation has a young and growing population. Over the last 25 years, Eabametoong has grown steadily at an average annual rate of 2.9 percent. In 2016, 35 percent of community members were under the age of 30 whereas across Canada this demographic makes up only 20 percent of the total population (see Figure 1).

With this growing youth population, Eabametoong First Nation has turned its eye to the future with a strong focus on community readiness for future generations. A recently completed capital plan, housing needs assessment and energy plans have all created a platform from which future community change can be built. In addition, ongoing work in holistic well-being, food security and education demonstrate the First Nation's desire and ability to lead on several SDGs.
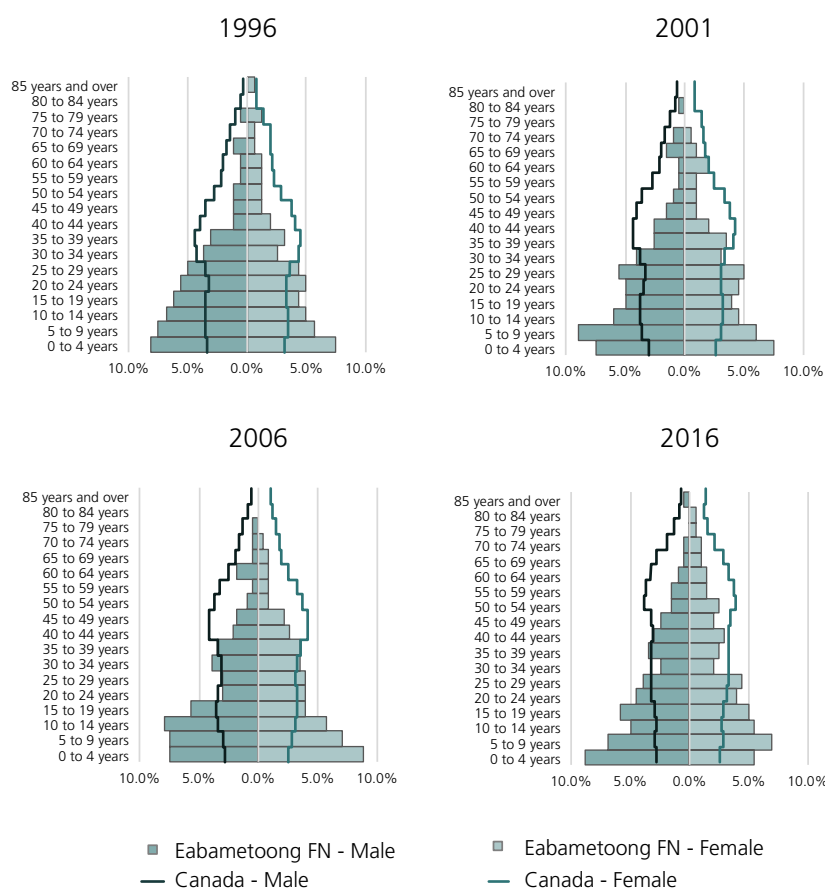

Figure 1: Eabametoong First Nation Population Pyramids

NISHNAWBE ASKI NATION

Nishnawbe Aski Nation (NAN) is a political territorial organization representing 49 First Nation communities within northern Ontario with the total population of membership (on- and off-reserve) estimated around 45,000 people. NAN encompasses James Bay Treaty No. 9 and Ontario's portion of Treaty No.5 and has a total land-mass covering two-thirds of the province of Ontario spanning over 540,000 square kilometres (see Figure 2). The people traditionally speak four languages: Oji-Cree in the west, Ojibway in the central-south area, and Cree and Algonquin in the east.

Nishnawbe Aski Nation's objectives are:

- Implementing advocacy and policy directives from NAN Chiefs-in-Assembly;
- Advocating to improve the quality of life for the people in areas of education, lands and resources, health, governance, and justice;
- Improving the awareness and sustainability of traditions, culture, and language of the people through unity and nationhood;
- Developing and implementing policies which reflect the aspirations and betterment of the people; and
- Developing strong partnerships with other organizations.

NAN uses a partnership-based model to improve the lives of its members in areas identified by Chiefs-in-Assembly. Across its various departments– including: housing & infrastructure; environment, energy & climate change; health transformation; social development; community wellness; social services; education and others– are implicated daily in the holistic work of assisting First Nations in developing and sustaining individual and community well-being. Programs have been, and continue to be, developed from a community-based perspective and rooted in local knowledge to achieve local goals. Across, and between disciplines NAN is already engaged, with its member Nations in addressing a number of SDGs through their own unique lens.

Figure 2: Map of Nishnawbe Aski Nation territory and First Nation members.

Background

In September 2015, the 193 member states of the General Assembly of the United Nations unanimously adopted the resolution, "Transforming our World: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development". The 2030 Agenda and its accompanying 17 Sustainable Development Goals (hereafter the Goals or SDGs), 169 targets and 232 indicators sought to provide a universal means for creating social, economic and environmental sustainability globally. Agenda 2030 is rooted in a human rights framework in its vision for eradicating poverty and is underpinned by the concept that no one should be left behind.[1]

Canada, as a member state, has committed to implementing Agenda 2030. In 2018 however, Commissioner of the Environment and Sustainable Development, Julie Gelfand found that "Without a clear leader, an implementation plan, and accurate and ongoing measurement and monitoring of results, Canada will not be able to fulfill the commitments it made to its citizens, and to the United Nations".[2] Her comment accompanied an Independent Auditor Report's Report, Canada's Preparedness to Implement the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals which included the recommendation that, "The Government of Canada (…) should establish and communicate an implementation plan to achieve the national targets and sustainable development goals in Canada".[3] This recommendation has directly led to the creation of this report through Canada's program of creating a National Strategy.

The creation of an Agenda 2030 National Strategy will have particular impact on those currently being left behind in Canada. In its 2018 voluntary national review Canada's Implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development Canada recognized that particular attention in policies and programs must be given to "under-represented and marginalized groups" which included "women, youth, newcomers to Canada, single parents, seniors, racialized communities, Indigenous peoples, persons with disabilities and LGBTQ2 and non-binary individuals". In this same report, the marginalization of Indigenous peoples was directly connected to Canada's context as a settler colonial state. The result of which is growing outcome gaps and a system in which, "many Indigenous people do not enjoy the same quality of life as other Canadians".[4]

While a National Strategy will look to directly impact the lives of Indigenous peoples in Canada, they have not played an active role in the creation of Agenda 2030 indicators. While Indigenous peoples were recognized as one of the nine "major groups" contributing to the development of Agenda 2030 no individual First Nations in Canada "had significant influence over, or involvement with, the development of the SDGs".[5] It also has to be recognized that the development of a National Strategy exists within a distinct policy context which must consider the distinct constitutional, treaty and legal obligations of Canada which in many cases separate Indigenous peoples from other stakeholders.

In this report, learnings from consultations with First Nations peoples in northern Ontario are used to provide direction to the development of a National Strategy focused on the improvement of well-being through self-determination.

A drinking fountain found in a on-reserve JK-9 school is unusable due to a decades long boiled water advisory.

Learnings

While nearly all participants had no previous knowledge or understanding of Agenda 2030 and SDGs there was widespread mistrust that a National Strategy would leave no one behind. This mistrust is the result of current and historical programs and policies in Canada which have consistently sought to erase First Nations peoples and their concerns. Consultations took place simultaneous to declarations of emergencies by First Nations; ongoing discrimination against children on reserves; and continued struggles to protect First Nations lands from resource development.

As a result of both the lack of previous knowledge of Agenda 2030 and mistrust of government programs; discussions focused on broader understandings of sustainable development, potential priorities and indicators. While goals themselves were often found to be relevant, their application in a First Nations context was often problematized. Questions arose about whose voices were represented in the creation of goals, targets and indicators? Were these indicators, global in scope, representative of local experience of First Nations peoples in remote northern Ontario? How would programs targeting SDGs impact the work people were doing to create change in their community? How is this different from previous government programs and how does it ensure the rights and autonomy of First Nations will be respected?

Rather than focusing on the large-scale, national-level implementation of SDGs participants were interested in focusing on their community's plans and ongoing efforts in creating sustainability and well-being. Many of these efforts are emerging out of a growing sense of Indigenous resurgence and self-determination; a focus on the revitalization of culture, particularly as it is embedded in land, language and governance. These initiatives will be highlighted in subsequent sections along with the existing structural barriers to their success– and therefore the development of sustainability– that were highlighted.

Implementation of an Agenda 2030 National Strategy with Indigenous communities must be done within the existing legal framework. Indigenous peoples are not simply another stakeholder group in Canada but have Rights protected by the constitution. First Nations of the Treaty 9 territory– the focus of this consultation– have a treaty and legal relationship with the crown which include particular fiduciary obligations. As well, the right of Indigenous people in Canada to self-determination, amongst other rights, are enshrined in the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP).

UNDRIP was adopted by the Human Rights Council of the United Nations in 2006; but Canada maintained objector status until 2016. As of the time of writing, Canada has still not adopted UNDRIP or its core principle of free prior and informed consent, which allows for self-determination of Indigenous peoples globally. The full adoption and domestication of UNDRIP into Canadian law is a critical precedent factor to achieving and maintaining well-being for Indigenous peoples. In thinking of a National Strategy, it is critical to recognize that 1/3 of SDG targets are linked to UNDRIP. [6]

The right to self-determination allows for Indigenous peoples to self-determine goals, targets and indicators for sustainable development. Recognizing the uniqueness of Indigenous peoples and their right to self-determination necessitates that alternative indicators be created rather than relying on comparisons to non-Indigenous populations. While universal indicators may direct additional funds to Indigenous peoples– as they will in Canada through their designation as a marginalized group and through a desire to close outcome gaps– they do so without properly consulting the target population and developing an appropriate response. An entirely separate and distinct framework must be adopted which would allow for the concept of sustainability and the balance between environmental, economic and social dimensions to be determined by local worldviews and values.

1. Fully implement UNDRIP as a first step in securing well-being for Indigenous peoples and cementing a framework for self-determination;

2. Indigenous peoples must be given the opportunity to create their own indicators to ensure relevancy of interventions and reflect the right to self-determination; and

3. Recognize culture as a critical element of sustainability for Indigenous peoples.

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NAN Housing Strategy session on metric development and housing design. Photo by Andy Beaver.

NISHNAWBE ASKI NATION HOUSING STRATEGY

Across Nishnawbe Aski Nation it is understood that the ongoing shortage and inadequacy of housing is negatively impacting individual and community well-being. The ongoing First Nations housing crisis has developed out of decades of inappropriate intervention. In 2014, the 49 NAN Chiefs in Assembly declared a Collective Housing Emergency. Nishnawbe Aski Nation's 2017 Infrastructure Summit and resulting report called for the creation of a housing strategy to address the crisis. Existing assessments of housing are conducted using national-level indicators not relevant to the unique cultural needs and lived experience of Nishnawbe Aski Nation members. By not measuring appropriate indicators, proposed solutions do not address those issues, values and goals most critical to communities. In order to create meaningful change in the housing system— including design, governance, planning and the built environment— it is important that Nishnawbe Aski Nation and its member First Nations possess high-quality information as well as have the skills and capacity to guide their housing programs.

March 26-27, 2019 Nishnawbe Aski Nation hosted an Environment, Climate Change & Housing Symposium which featured a full day's collaborative work on the NAN Housing strategy. Together, more than 40 community housing leaders worked together to develop a series of metrics which would represent the lived experiences of the diverse populations in their First Nations. Moving beyond problem identification, housing leaders also looked to create initial action plans and designs which would address the distinct issues and barriers they faced. Through the coming two years additional workshops will be held at the community and regional level to further develop the Strategy as well as capacity for housing system change looking to fulfill every NAN member's Right to housing.[7]

Leaving No One Behind

While it has already been demonstrated above that Indigenous peoples, as a whole, have been purposefully left behind non-Indigenous populations in Canada, Indigenous populations are diverse and have differing outcomes.[8] On-reserve populations often face larger outcome gaps, with particularly exacerbated results found in remote and isolated reserves. On-reserve, like in cities, people can face intersectional barriers; women, children, seniors and Elders, LGBTQ2S people and people with disabilities all face increased challenges.

Creating a system which leaves no one behind must recognize the unique challenges these groups face and co-develop programs with them. Power relationships – like that between the federal government and those currently left behind – can make the development of programs and implementation of Agenda 2030 challenging and risk the reinforcement of colonial outcomes.[9] Solutions or interventions created simply to close outcome gaps, achieve a universal standard or meet a target; enacted with the participation of target populations are not only unlikely to be effective and risk unintended consequences.

Those closest to the target population, and the target population themselves are best suited to create interventions and these interventions must be supported with a whole of society approach. While governments have distinct obligations to Indigenous peoples, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission Calls to Action and other documents demonstrate how across-sectors and disciplines roles can be taken on to ensure Indigenous peoples well-being. The solutions however must be rooted in community. A common situation described was 'outside' interventions (from southern Canada and beyond) being thrust upon First Nations under the name of innovation or best practices without listening to the existing local knowledge. Leaving no one behind requires a recognition of local ways of knowing, local solutions and in particular, ensuring those currently being left behind are an integral part of designing solutions.

Leaving no one behind relies on support and partnership across sectors and disciplines. While ideas and solutions should be developed within communities, participants were open to joining others in seeing solutions executed. However, the existing linear model of aide to Indigenous communities– and other marginalized communities globally– has proven a failure. Instead, participants spoke of a need for relational work and a need for deep partnership. Rather than being extractive or service driven, participants spoke about a desire for shared or mutual benefit and ongoing relationships of trust and understanding.

1. Indigenous peoples are not a homogenous group and distinct, intersectional solutions are required for those currently facing the most inequitable outcomes;

2. Solution-creation must be generated by target populations; and must recognize local distinction; and

3. Universal policy risks re-entrenching colonial outcomes; success must be determined and measured by the population itself.

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Fort Hope Farm strawberry planting. Photo courtesy of @forthopefarm

EABAMETOONG FIRST NATION GARDEN PROJECT

Like many other fly-in First Nations in northern Ontario Eabametoong faces significant barriers to food security and sovereignty. The high cost of air freight and shrinking winter road season has increased community reliance on packaged and processed foods; with fresh fruits and vegetables rarely making it to the community. A number of barriers have also developed which have prevented members from accessing country foods which were previously the staple of the community's diet. In order to address the growing health concerns from food security issues and increase education and awareness of the possibility of locally sourced foods a community garden project and working group were developed.

Years later, the farm– having outgrown the title of garden– has received provincial awards for innovation and presents a model of a successful community-driven project. While the farm is reaching its primary goal of growing a diverse range of vegetables which it supplies to community members at little to no cost there are additional advantages. We heard from members of the farm team, school principal, local healthcare providers and community leaders about how the farm programming has been extended into a variety of health programs, curriculum and community events to also grow local capacity, knowledge and pride. The success of the farm, while locally driven has also leveraged the assistance and expertise of longtime community partners including Guelph University and a series of consultants. Building on the trust and relationships established from previous projects, partners were able to assist with technical components of the project including fundraising, soil sampling and the ongoing feasibility study for community greenhouses. While the farm represents a major first step towards food security, it also demonstrated the interrelationship of community goals and the possibilities which exist from strong partnerships.

Planning and Self-Determination

With 17 goals, 169 targets and 232 indicators operationalizing Agenda 2030 requires prioritization. It is not possible for a National Strategy to cover each element in fine detail, but how local prioritization is undertaken will have a dramatic impact on results. Participants shared how shifting government priorities are a regular barrier to successful long-term planning for First Nations; as priorities shift so too do funding mechanisms and as a result community programs. A National Strategy, particularly one developed during an election cycle risks continuing this trend undermining opportunities for local success.

A critical component of sustainable development and achieving well-being is the ability to plan holistically for the future. A number of participants spoke of failed projects, or projects that were at risk of failure as a result of unsteady financial support or changing programs, despite measurable success. The colonial state asserts its authority and control by creating systems of financial dependence ensuring that Indigenous peoples remain beholden to the federal government; a state in which many First Nations currently exist. Annual funding cycles, a bureaucratic reporting regime and a constant competition for limited resources are the environment in which First Nations currently attempt to develop sustainability and well-being.

The existing framework limits the potential success of locally developed initiatives and creates uncertainty in partnerships. Canada's National Strategy should not simply add another layer of bureaucracy and force First Nations to learn a new language to access funding but should instead commit to supporting the work already being undertaken by First Nations. Partners outside of government as well should seek out the locally formed projects in need of incubation or growth, not requiring projects to conform to their understanding of Agenda 2030 but instead allowing Indigenous peoples to lead the sustainability conversation.

A transformation of funding mechanisms and allowing Indigenous peoples to be able to plan for the longer-term would represent a significant change towards the creation of individual and community well-being. Self-determination will still require the support of a variety of partners but following local rather than external solutions ensures that interventions will be sensitive to population in need. Ensuring that this support is stable and multi-year, following decades long calls from Indigenous peoples will also allow for the sustainability required to see through the scale of transformation required to meet Goals set out.

1. Prioritization of Goals, targets and indicators must be done by those who will benefit from programs. Well-being should not be a political; and

2. Sustainable development and the creation of individual and community well-being relies on the ability of communities to create long-term plans and be assured of consistent funding streams.

Canada's National Strategy should commit to supporting the work already being undertaken by First Nations, allowing Indigenous peoples to lead the sustainability conversation.

Recommendations

1. Fully implement UNDRIP as a first step in securing well-being for Indigenous peoples and cementing a framework for self-determination;

2. Indigenous peoples must be given the opportunity to create their own indicators to ensure relevancy of interventions and reflect the right to self-determination; and

3. Recognize culture as a critical element of sustainability for Indigenous peoples.

4. Indigenous peoples are not a homogenous group and distinct, intersectional solutions are required for those currently facing the most inequitable outcomes;

5. Solution-creation must be generated by target populations; and must recognize local distinction; and

6. Universal policy risks re-entrenching colonial outcomes; success must be determined and measured by the population itself.

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Endnotes

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