

research snapshot

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What Place Does Development Have in the Lives of Aboriginals?

What is this research about?

For Aboriginal people in Canada, strategies for economic development are complex. The issue is usually stereotyped as a struggle between “traditional” ways of living and “modern” growth. However, change and growth have always been a part of Aboriginal societies and cultures. When it comes to economic and political changes, many Aboriginal nations seek a balance. How should one maintain the values, beliefs and norms of their culture while engaging with new opportunities for self-governance and economic development.

What did the researcher do?

The researcher looked at three areas of concern with Aboriginal communities living in Northern Canada. First, she spoke of both the strengths and limits of prioritizing development among Aboriginals. Second, the researcher looked at the opportunities that self-governance brought to Aboriginals. Finally, she looked at how development projects can help Aboriginals finance social support in other areas.

What did the researcher find?

The researcher found that Aboriginal groups may benefit from taking part in development

What you need to know:

For Aboriginal communities, traditional values and knowledge should be at the forefront of development projects.

projects, as it may be a potential source for empowerment. Previous “development” in Canada centered on Canada’s intervention on Northern lands and its resources. However, Aboriginals have gained more agency in leading the type of development they want to see. For example, the Vuntut Gwitchin nation have participated in these projects, while opposing others like oil and gas development, because of the negative effect on the community’s cultural and social well-being.

An emphasis was made for Aboriginal self-government to be “indigenized.” That is, self-government today is understood to fit in the larger framework of Canada’s governing structures. In order to ensure that Western-style governments do not absorb all Aboriginal customs, self-government should be informed by traditional knowledge. This includes supporting programs that promote culture. For example,

the Mikisew Cree nation implements programs for youth to return to traditional lands, as well as an Elders program where Elders teach youth traditional skills and knowledge.

The researcher also found that development projects may also support the different social needs in Aboriginal communities. That is, economic growth would allow for more wealth to fund housing and education needs. It would also support unemployment by providing work opportunities and reduce poverty.

How can you use this research?

This research may be useful for policymakers, as it suggests areas of support when working with Aboriginal communities. It offers insight on the complex and changing attitudes of some Aboriginal nations when it comes to economic projects. It also suggests ways in which self-governance can work to be empowering and valuable for Canada and Aboriginals.

About the Researcher

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