Insights from the Poverty Action Research Project

Plenary presentation to the Cando annual meeting and conference, River Cree Resort, October 24, 2018
Assembly of First Nations

Historical origins of the project

- First Nations Economic Advisory Group, (Make Poverty History)
- Chief’s Committee on Economic Development
- Academic Research Committee
- AFN partnering with Research Team on application to CIHR
- Poverty Action Research Project
From the Report’s Foreword by Dr. Paulette Tremblay, CEO, Assembly of First Nations

- “For healing to become real and meaningful within First Nations, actions must be created and undertaken by those who must live with the results. First Nations must drive the direction and [these] research projects provide clear and compelling evidence of this.

- Passion, generosity, love, caring, and sharing are values that the First Nations demonstrated as they worked tirelessly to move towards health and well-being for their families and First Nations.”
What did we do?

- Hired a community-based coordinator and established advisory mechanisms
- Conducted research: interviews, small group discussions,
- Developed community profiles
- Worked with the community to develop strategic plans and have the plans be endorsed
- Assisted with plan implementation when requested
- Provided small grants in support of projects
The five First Nations participating in PARP

Location of Five Communities Participating in PARP
The Project Team

➢ Stephen Cornell, Harvard Project on American Indian Economic Development; Udall Centre for Studies in Public Policy, U. Arizona

➢ Jeffrey Denis, Sociology, McMaster University

➢ Jennifer Dockstator, Project Director, National Centre for Collaboration in Indigenous Education, Trent University

➢ Mark Dockstator, President, First Nations University

➢ Gérard Duhaime, Sociology, Laval University

➢ Charlotte Loppie, Centre for Indigenous Research and Community-Led Engagement, Faculty of Public Health and Social Policy, University of Victoria
➢ John Loxley, Economics, University of Manitoba
➢ David Newhouse, Indigenous Studies, Trent University
➢ Lars Osberg, McCulloch Professor of Economics, Dalhousie University
➢ Jonathan Thompson, Director, Social Development, Assembly of First Nations
➢ Warren Weir, Academic Administrator, Vancouver Island University: Cowichan Campus
➢ Judy Whiteduck, Director, Economic Partnerships, Assembly of First Nations
➢ Fred Wien, Professor Emeritus, Dalhousie University (project lead)
➢ Wanda Wuttunee, Native Studies, University of Manitoba
Misipawistik Cree Nation
Poverty Action Research Project

Yvonne Ballantyne and Fred Wien
Misipawistik Cree Nation is located about 400km North of Winnipeg and sits across the river from Grand Rapids.

There are about 1500 people in the community. Our main source of income is fishing.
Our community is very adaptable to change and can still thrive given the support needed. This is evident in the adaptation of the Hydro generating station built in the 50’s. The ability to adapt and change is probably our community’s biggest strength.

The first thought was to open the minds of our youth. We thought it made more sense to help them deal with any issues that they may be having. Awaken the Spirit and Traditional Teachings addressed these subjects and issues. This is the third year having a local Sundance for our people.
Many of the PARP projects took place throughout various areas in the community. Many were food insecure specific. The youth were taught how to fish, make bread, make salsa and jams, raise chickens.

We also helped the youth build a portfolio. Included was a cover letter, resume, certificates from every workshop or program they attended.

This was very effective in building self esteem and self worth. It provided hands on visual conformation of their successes and growth.
Proportion of youth on assistance 2015

18-24 youth on Income Assistance May 2015

- 24-64 year old
- 18-24 year olds
Proportion of youth on assistance 2017

18-24 youth on Income Assistance November 2017

- 25-64 year olds
- 18-24 year olds
Academic reflections

- Note diversity of approaches. MCN emphasis on youth. Civic society leadership, limited involvement of Chief and Council.

- An emphasis on small projects with potential spread effects e.g., driver education project: two cohorts and spread to Tribal Council. Over 30 projects supported, including youth video; lake-keepers

- Bringing in other partners e.g., Manitoba Hydro; Province. Hockey equipment and computers. Mention Eabametoong and the City of Markham. TRC effect but no framework.
T’it’q’et
Former Chief Kevin Whitney and Warren Weir
We are the P’egp’íg’lha of the St’át’imc Nation. The Creator placed us here and that connection to our land can never be broken. The traditional ways, values and laws of our ancestors are held in the St’át’imc language and are written on the land. Our Elders have passed them down in the stories to the children and grandchildren since the beginning. We are committed to working together to build our community in a good way that is based on the teachings of our ancestors.
Up to a certain point, we had been able to provide food and shelter for ourselves. But after colonial contact, we have been reliant on resource extraction and government jobs: mill, forestry, railroad. If we focus on strategic planning as problem solving, then an examination of the St’at’imc view, particularly from the T’it’q’et perspective, is crucial to understanding the decisions and solutions inherent in an environmentally sustainable relationship with the territory.
Sharing knowledge that elders have is essential but it is also important to show them learning new skills. Higher than average number of people who have gotten an education is also a reflection of this community’s commitment to develop and grow. A fair amount of planning was already underway by the community when PARP started: economic development strategy, health, CCP.
Find a balanced strategy that addresses the internal – personal/community - factors of poverty that are characterized by ‘loss’ and the external forces that can be summarized by the word ‘lack’.

Links between past and present
Fiscal responsibility and community development

The desired end product for participation in PARP was to come up with a community focused strategy to address poverty.
Definition of poverty took some doing. “What do you mean by ‘poverty’?” is a question I heard regularly. In the end, we discussed it and losses, of language and culture, access to land and water and most significantly, control over our own children’s futures, as a result of colonialism was the biggest factor/contributor to the definition of poverty for T’ít’q’et. Communicating, with fullness and accuracy, these concepts to each other and peoples’ ideas on poverty may change and enable us to grow past our current limitations.
Figure out a way to get more community members involved. Use the community profile that’s been drafted to create a template for proposal applications. Use health survey completed by PARP to provide a baseline measure and strategic directions.
Climate change and health

- P’egp’íg’Iha Council Working on Climate Change position paper
- Water position paper
- Salmon and Fisheries position paper
- March 23rd community consultation on these three papers.
- We must ask which aspects of the environment are most important, which are ignored and/or under-utilized and what are the criteria and implications of this selectivity.
- PARP contributed background research on climate change
Academic reflections (Warren)

- Land, food and climate change
- Education as shared learning
- Measuring success.
Some concluding thoughts

- So many government programs focused on specific things, therefore fragmentation
- So many proposals required of First Nations, and so many reports to be submitted
- In the PARP project, a different approach: what steps do the communities themselves want to take to advance community health and well-being?
- The response was framed as a broad-based, multi-dimensional plan e.g., Building Our Community Together
- Governments typically not set up to respond to such plans in a comprehensive, holistic manner

Draft for discussion. Advice to the Minister
Rejecting poverty concept in favour of holistic conceptions of development

- Mainstream approaches to defining and measuring poverty tend to emphasize the material aspect, relying heavily on levels of income in absolute terms – is it sufficient to buy a given basket of goods and services -- or in relation to the income of others.

- By these kinds of measures, there is a lot of poverty in First Nations but the concept was not embraced. We were told that Indigenous languages do not contain terms that can directly translate into “poverty”. If people feel poor in the mainstream sense, we were told, it is because it is a condition that was imposed on First Nation peoples through colonization and through government responses to deprivation that prioritized the provision of “welfare” over that of rebuilding First Nation economies and societies.
“For Anishinaabe people, the good life does not mean making money, buying things, or winning awards. Rather, it has to do with taking care of yourself, your family and your community. It is showing love by performing acts of kindness. It is having the courage to be honest with ourselves and with others. It is getting wisdom through years of listening to others and learning from our mistakes. It is being generous to our family and community without expecting anything in return. It is living life as a kind, humble member of the community. This is the idea behind The Good Life, Bimaadizwin.”
First Nations balance collective and individual action

- When we think about improving health and well-being, it is natural to focus first on individuals and families, and to advocate for strategies and services that would improve their lives e.g., addiction services.

- We are finding that the most effective strategies involve action at different levels (e.g., drug dealers, hr strategies, own source revenues, jobs). Some of these measures are centered at the collective, First Nation, level in recognition that strategies that focus on individuals, while necessary and even essential, do not adequately respond to the situation and may not, either, work very well in the absence of a supportive collective context.

- Community plans are multi-faceted in this way. Eabametoong and Sipekne’katik examples.
Stephen Cornell on the individual focus of government policy

“In the CANZUS countries (Canada, Australia, New Zealand and the United States) governments address Indigenous issues by focusing on Indigenous persons, believing that if you address enough individuals then the collective problem will be solved.

…I believe the approach is backwards. The collective, in fact – the nation, the community, the people, the tribe, whatever you call it -- the collective is the heart of the matter. Invest in the aspirations and well-being of peoples and the well-being of individuals will follow.
The question is not how we make sure that the average Indigenous person has the same opportunities and advantages as the average non-Indigenous person has. The question instead is how we rebuild Indigenous nations that can provide their people with the opportunity to lead satisfying, productive lives without having to give up the land, the language, the culture, the kin relationships, that make them who they are...

Our research evidence from the Harvard Project and the Native Nations Institute is clear. Government policy does better when it is designed not around individuals but around nations, communities, peoples, and the goals they have for their own futures”.

Stephen Cornell video address to the PARP National Workshop, Ottawa, March 9, 2018.