Land, environment & life: Cree social economy

Project #32

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Social Economy Centre

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Introduction

What does the term “social economy” mean to an Aboriginal community in Ontario?

- The research team selected the northern Ontario First Nation community of Fort Albany to:
  - Critically assess the relevance of social economy concepts and frameworks to Cree people of Fort Albany First Nation.
  - Identify areas of local economic practice that are culturally meaningful.
  - Support local Cree participants to document local economic practice and key issues related to social, economic and environmental change.
Background and Rationale

The social economy frame carries cultural assumptions from the Western paradigm that do not translate easily to Cree cultural contexts.

- Omushkegowuk (Cree) strive to maintain traditional and mixed forms of economic and social practice building on relationships of people to their land base.

- Resulting traditional practices and kinship obligations have implications for the understanding of “third sector” services.

- What perspectives do youth, adults, and elders express concerning the role of land for social and economic well-being?
Community Based and Led

- A community advisory group from Fort Albany oversees all research activities and makes suggestions for what is needed.
- Research undertaken for the project will also inform the land use committee.
- Youth from the community will interview elders, adults and peers from the community, using the material as the basis for a radio documentary.
Role and Participation of Community Partners

Chris Metatawabin, Economic Development Officer, Fort Albany First Nation

- Facilitates local community involvement.
- Coordinator and member of a community consultation group for the research project.
- Ensures inclusion of diverse perspectives within the community.
- Ensures inclusion of youth and elder voices, and a balance between male and female.
Role and Participation of Community Partners

- Community advisory group in Fort Albany
  - Ensures inclusion of diverse perspectives within the community.
  - Ensures inclusion of voices young and old, male and female.
  - Directs the research project to ensure the research provides value to the community.
  - Provides questions that will assist the community with working toward its own goals of economic and social development.
River Trip & Radio Documentary

- Intro to research workshop
  - A two-day “intro to research” workshop prepares youth to interview and record elder stories about land and life.
  - The workshop reviews the basics of community-based research and provides some interviewing skills enhancement.

- River Trip
  - The youth prepare for a river excursion involving community leaders and elders where they can document stories about traditional territory on their own terms.
  - 10-14 day river trip during the summer 2008 with the elders provides the setting for conversations that become the data for the documentary and our project.

- Radio Documentary
  - The youth-produced radio documentary provides skills-building opportunities for youth and disseminates information to the community about our findings on land and life in Fort Albany.
Cree perspectives on social responsibilities may differ from key concepts in Canadian social economy literature

- Land as provider serves purpose of third sector providing basic needs, food, sustenance, shelter, mindful of community responsibilities
- The land’s role in Cree social relations is reflected in changes to language:
  - The region elders call Pacquatawmik refers to all of traditional territory, a place that provides all one needs.
  - The youth refer to Noscheemik, meaning ‘bush’ or camp, a more specific location and different conceptualization of land, while Pacquatawmik is no longer used, reflecting changes after settlement onto the reserve, changes in cultural and economic practice.
  - Concepts relevant to seeking deeper understanding about how the Cree view the meaning of social and economy.
How Students Benefited from the Project

- Doctoral student involvement
  - Sheila Gruner, an OISE/UT Ph.D. student, is building relationships in the community where her thesis research is located.

- Local community student involvement
  - Fort Albany youth will attend a workshop where they will learn research skills, and plan a river trip.
  - The river trip will bring youth and Elders together to learn about the land, language and culture.
  - The youth will videotape and audiotape conversations with Elders creating a community resource, an archival record broadcast on the Internet and radio.
Next Steps

- Workshop with youth in April
- River trip is scheduled for June
- Youth continue to interview through the summer 2008
- Documentary produced in the fall of 2008
- Findings will support Fort Albany land use planning process, the research advisory group and the Social Economy Centre.