

AWIDER CIRCLE

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ABORIGINAL
VOICES IN
CANADIAN
CITIES



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Disclaimer

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Contents

A Wider Circle: Aboriginal Voices in Canadian Cities

3	Foreword
3	Context & Overview
6	The Goal: Meaningful involvement and voice in city-level policy making
8	Existing Efforts
10	Gaps & Challenges
12	Insights & Recommendations
14	Bibliography	

Foreword

Repairing the relationship between Aboriginal peoples and Canada remains an unfinished project. Much attention has been focused, to date, on Aboriginal rights and self-determination on traditional, treaty, and reserve lands. Yet Canada is increasingly an urban nation, and Aboriginal peoples share in this urban reality. With the majority of Canadians now living in cities, the ongoing reconciliation process will, in large part, take place there.

We are a group of Action Canada Fellows who, a few months ago, embarked on a journey to discover the reality and history of our own country. At the beginning of this project, some of us had a limited understanding of our country's Aboriginal heritage and of the contemporary experiences of Aboriginal peoples in Canada. As six young Canadians from diverse personal and professional backgrounds, we sought to engage with the voices of Aboriginal peoples living in Canada's major cities.

Our task is certainly incomplete. We have only joined an ongoing journey; we have no pretence that we have reached a destination. Yet, we know that the journey must be taken together. We know that the urban Canadian narrative must embrace Aboriginal stories. We have learned the importance of listening. Our foremost recommendation is that our fellow Canadians should have the opportunity to do the same.



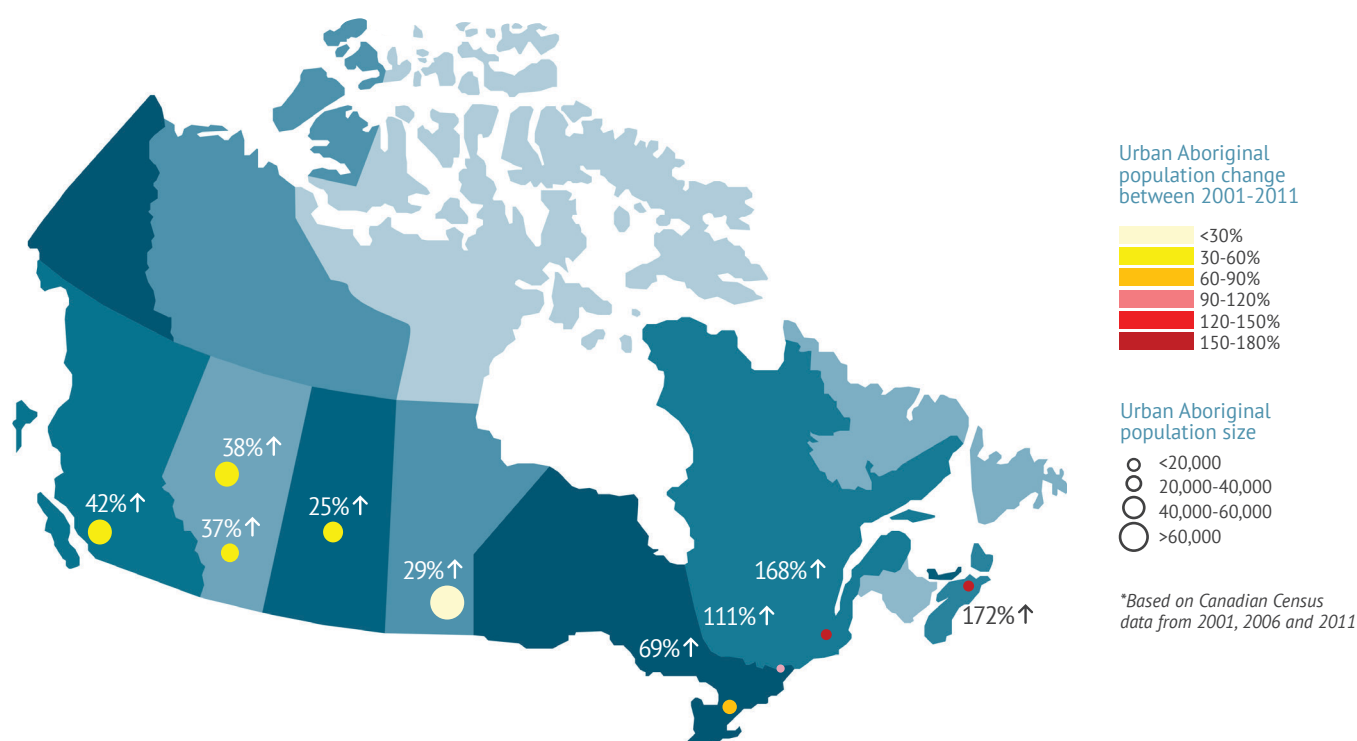
Context & Overview

A lack of meaningful Aboriginal voice in the life of Canadian cities

Urban Aboriginal peoples are an important part of the mosaic that makes up the modern Canadian city. Yet, the difficult history of Canada's relationship with Aboriginal peoples strains the relationship between urban Aboriginal peoples and the broader Canadian population living in cities. This tension involves a range of policies and programs that impact urban life, touching on the responsibilities of all orders of government. This report argues that addressing the lack of urban Aboriginal voices in city-level policy processes (e.g., as it relates to land-use planning, youth programs, housing and homelessness, or more broadly in advancing a reconciliation agenda) is an important step in resolving this tension. We propose that fostering such reconciliation in cities will have far-reaching effects producing stronger, more connected, healthier, and more vibrant cities.

An increasingly urban Aboriginal population

The Aboriginal population is the fastest-growing segment of the Canadian population, increasing by 20% between 2006 and 2011. Aboriginal peoples are younger than average¹, and increasingly urban: in 2011, 56% of Aboriginal peoples lived in urban areas, up from 49% in 1996. The map below illustrates the growth of Aboriginal populations in select cities across the country in recent years.



In some cities, Aboriginal peoples' traditional lands, territories, and designated reserves engage constitutional obligations for consultation by governments. However, many urban Aboriginal peoples do not share land rights in their city of residence. This is because, in many cases, Aboriginal peoples have migrated to cities from their distant traditional territories, or other provinces or cities. As a result, urban Aboriginal populations are diverse in their cultural identities and socioeconomic character. While it was once conventional wisdom that Aboriginal people living in cities were just "passing through," this is no longer the case².

In 2010, the Environics Institute undertook work to offer Canadians a new perspective of urban Aboriginal peoples. The Urban Aboriginal Peoples Study offered a new picture of urban Aboriginal realities in Canada's major cities. One of the study's findings was that "[t]here is a basic tension in the hearts and minds of non-Aboriginal urban Canadians of where Aboriginal people fit in the Canadian mosaic." At the same time, urban Aboriginals have "widespread belief that they are consistently viewed in negative ways by non-Aboriginal people."³ In other words, there remains a tension and divide between the lived experiences of non-Aboriginal urban Canadians and their Aboriginal neighbours.

¹ As of 2011, 46% of Aboriginal peoples in Canada were under 25, while only 29% of Canada's population were under 25. (source: 2011 National Household Survey).

² See Adams, M. and Gossnell-Myers, G. « Don't forget Canada's urban aboriginals. They're not just passing through » *The Globe and Mail*, January 22, 2013.

³ Environics Institute (2010). Urban Aboriginal Peoples Study, p. 10 and 11.

A moment of opportunity for Canada

This tension has deep historical roots. The process of realizing Aboriginal rights and building new partnerships among Aboriginal peoples and other Canadians is an ongoing process. This year, 2015, will be an important year in terms of advancing reconciliation, in part given the expected release of the findings of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), and the conversation that it will generate in Canadian society. As the TRC has highlighted, “Collective efforts from all peoples are necessary to revitalize the relationship between Aboriginal peoples and Canadian society ... Reconciliation ... is a goal that will take the commitment of multiple generations but when it is achieved, when we have reconciliation – it will make for a better, stronger Canada.”⁴

Achieving reconciliation between Aboriginal peoples and non-Aboriginal Canadians is critical to the country’s future prosperity and to the dignity of all citizens. Major cities are where Canadians increasingly build lives and forge relationships. As a result, there is a role for municipalities in advancing the reconciliation agenda.

This report explores the role that cities can play in engaging Aboriginal perspectives in policies that impact urban life. We start from the following principles:

- **first**, that a deeper partnership between municipalities and urban Aboriginal peoples will yield better urban communities for all;
- **second**, that current structures for engagement, while promising and positive, fall short of that goal; and
- **third**, that enhancing Aboriginal peoples’ voices in city-level policy processes (such as land-use planning, youth programs, or housing and homelessness) is an important step for reconciliation.

It is worth noting that in this report, two elements are at play, distinct but reinforcing each other:

- **first**, the notion of stronger mechanisms for non-Aboriginal citizens and urban Aboriginal voices to come together in planning for the delivery of services that affect urban Aboriginal populations directly; and
- **second**, the notion of improved opportunities for Aboriginal perspectives to be integrated in city-level public policy or civic processes writ large, as befitting local circumstances.

The next section describes an aspirational vision for meaningful voice, after which the report explores existing efforts, in order to identify gaps and opportunities. The final section provides some insights as to how to bridge those gaps and leverage those opportunities.

⁴ Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada. Retrieved from <http://www.trc.ca/websites/reconciliation/index.php?p=312>

Meaningful involvement and voice in city-level policy making

What does meaningful involvement and voice for urban Aboriginal peoples in city-level policy making mean?

We propose characteristics to define what this goal would entail:



- 1 A strong urban Aboriginal presence in institutions of governance generally, and formal structures for consultation with Aboriginal peoples on specific policies and issues;
- 2 Regular and sustained engagement of urban Aboriginal peoples in the policy processes that affect them, with engagement beginning early to identify issues and set the agenda for ongoing involvement;
- 3 Opportunities for Aboriginal peoples and non-Aboriginal citizens to gather together and learn from each other; and
- 4 A positive and visible Aboriginal presence in Canadian cities and celebration of Aboriginal cultures.

A strong urban Aboriginal presence in institutions of governance

A strong urban Aboriginal presence in institutions of governance would be characterized by early and ongoing involvement of Aboriginal peoples and local First Nations in the formulation, administration, and evaluation of policies and programs at the city level. In addition, urban Aboriginal organizations themselves would have the requisite capacity to undertake consultations and provide this input to all orders of government.

Cities who see it in their interest to regularly engage the urban Aboriginal community

Cities that have the courage to start a dialogue will lead the way towards reconciliation. As examples, Vancouver, Ottawa, and Winnipeg have dedicated staff, constituted municipal Aboriginal advisory councils, promoted events that recognize and celebrate Aboriginal contributions, and established working partnerships with the urban Aboriginal communities, as well as with the provincial and federal governments to set policy priorities.

These efforts provide draft blueprints for other cities to examine and adapt to their own circumstances.



Vancouver's experience in 2013-14 provides a powerful example. In partnership with Reconciliation Canada, and in the wake of the passage of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, the City of Vancouver supported a Year of Reconciliation.

This effort sought to acknowledge the negative cultural impacts and stereotypes that resulted from Canada's residential school system, to witness the process of reconciliation and healing, and advance with a greater shared understanding of the historical impacts that have shaped the experiences of Aboriginal peoples to date.

A visible and positive Aboriginal presence in Canadian cities

Municipalities have the tools to foster dialogue and relationships between citizens. They can create spaces and events that recognize Aboriginal peoples' contemporary cultures and contributions to the history of the city. Events and symbols (such as recognition of Aboriginal territories and place-names or inclusion of Aboriginal ceremony in government business) can promote greater awareness of Canada's urban Aboriginal reality.

Concurrently, urban Aboriginal service organizations can advance a visible and positive Aboriginal presence in Canadian cities, through the places and spaces they occupy.



*In Ottawa, the **Wabano Centre for Aboriginal Health** incorporates the teachings, cultures, and traditions of Aboriginal people. It also acts as a bridge to the broader community in disseminating traditional teachings such as that of the medicine wheel.*



*In Vancouver, **Skwachàys Lodge** houses a fair-trade gallery, a boutique hotel, and an urban Aboriginal artist residence. Owned and operated by the Vancouver Native Housing Society, the facility provides shelter-rate apartments for Aboriginal people at risk of homelessness. The building features a rooftop sweat lodge and smudge room used for spiritual cleansing. A traditional longhouse sits atop the century-old Victorian façade.*

Existing efforts show promise

While a gap persists, urban Aboriginal peoples and cities across the country have built solid foundations.



Current models for engagement

Urban Aboriginal communities often come together around Friendship centres. These centres originated in the 1950s when the number of Aboriginal people moving into urban areas increased. Friendship centres are now the primary providers of culturally enhanced programs, services, and referrals to urban Aboriginal residents. Indeed, friendship centres have helped seed a range of other Aboriginal service organizations.

First Nations, Metis and Inuit have a rights-based role in collective representation. This role is different from that of urban Aboriginal service organizations (which can advocate for the needs of the population served), and from that of mechanisms that seek to invite, more broadly, urban Aboriginal perspectives in city-level civic processes writ large. Separately, local First Nations also engage with cities in land-use planning in their territories and in providing services for their citizens.

Municipalities are exploring different models to support the engagement of urban Aboriginal perspectives in policy processes. To date, three general models have emerged:

- **Municipal committees**, typically established and appointed by city councils, that provide advice to mayors and city councils (e.g. Aboriginal Affairs Committees in Vancouver, Calgary, Edmonton, and Toronto);
- **Councils** created to provide a unified voice in cities, organized as either coalitions of service organizations (e.g. Metro Vancouver Aboriginal Executive Council, Ottawa Aboriginal Coalition, and Toronto Aboriginal Support Services Council) or by individual membership (e.g. Aboriginal Council of Winnipeg); and
- **Partnership committees** with representation from identified Aboriginal organizations, local First Nations, governments and other groups, including NGOs and the private sector (e.g. Calgary Urban Aboriginal Initiative, Winnipeg Aboriginal Strategic Partnership Circle, and Montreal Urban Aboriginal Community Strategy Network).

The efforts are in their early stages. There remain questions about whether they are sufficient and which model best fits each city. The chart on the next page surveys existing structures and processes for consultation and engagement in a sampling of Canadian cities, along these three models.

City	Body	Description	Governance
VANCOUVER	<i>Metro Vancouver Aboriginal Executive Council</i>	Established in 2008, provides unified voice through regular council and round table meetings addressing priority areas.	25 Executive Directors from urban off-reserve Aboriginal organizations
	<i>Urban Aboriginal Peoples Advisory Committee</i>	Established by Vancouver bylaw, mandated to coordinate Aboriginal consultation and facilitate collaborative decision-making on municipal matters.	15 voting members, including at least 3 members identifying as Métis; members selected through civic committee public selection process.
CALGARY	<i>Calgary Urban Aboriginal Initiative</i>	Aims to convene stakeholders, community and agencies together with all levels of government for domain-specific forums (health, education, employment, justice, housing, services, funding, human rights).	Representatives from city, province and federal governments; Treaty 7 Economic Development Corp.; Métis Nation of Alberta; each “domain” group; an elder; members-at-large from Aboriginal community; and Chamber of Commerce.
	<i>Calgary Aboriginal Urban Affairs Committee</i>	Provides City Council with advice on matters affecting Aboriginal Calgarians; reports to Standing Policy Committee on Community and Protective Services.	At least 10 members appointed by City Council, of which majority of members must be Aboriginal.
EDMONTON	<i>Edmonton Aboriginal Urban Affairs Committee</i>	Established in 1994 by City Council and mandated to advocate on behalf of urban Aboriginal peoples and liaise with city.	At least 10 members appointed by City Council, of which majority of members must be Aboriginal.
SASKATOON	<i>Central Urban Métis Federation</i>	Founded in 1993 and incorporated in 1994 to ensure that the voice of the Métis people is heard at the municipal level within Saskatoon and district.	12 members, elected by the Métis community in Saskatoon
	<i>Saskatoon Tribal Council</i>	Established in 1982, collaborates with seven First Nations, city, federal and provincial governments, school boards and private industry to provide programs and services.	Governing body formed from seven First Nations (Kinistin Saulteaux, Mistawasis, Muskeg Lake Cree, Muskoday, One Arrow, Whitecap Dakota, and Yellow Quill).
WINNIPEG	<i>Aboriginal Council of Winnipeg</i>	Provides a political voice for status and non-status Aboriginal peoples in Winnipeg.	10 board members, all of which must be Aboriginal, over 16 years of age and residents of Winnipeg.
	<i>Aboriginal Strategic Partnership Circle</i>	Established in 2004, guides activities under Aboriginal participation component of Winnipeg Partnership Agreement.	Includes representatives from the federal, provincial and municipal governments as well as members of the Aboriginal community.
TORONTO	<i>Toronto Aboriginal Support Services Association</i>	Established in mid-1990s by Aboriginal service organizations, works to collectively raise issues facing Aboriginal peoples in Toronto.	4-member executive council, acting as a subset of 11-member board of directors, with representation from member Aboriginal service organizations.
	<i>Aboriginal Affairs Committee</i>	Established to act as an advisory body to the Mayor and City Council.	18 members (12 representing Aboriginal peoples and 1 council member), with appointments under City’s Nominating Committee Process.
OTTAWA	<i>Ottawa Aboriginal Coalition</i>	Established in 2001 as alliance of service-delivery organizations to advocate on issues facing Aboriginal community.	Composed of eight member organizations and a representative from the Métis community.
	<i>Aboriginal Working Committee</i>	Established in 2007 by City Council to provide recommendations to Council and identify inter-governmental partnerships.	Composed of representatives from: Ottawa Aboriginal Coalition; City of Ottawa; United Way Ottawa; Ottawa Police; and Ottawa Carleton District School Board.
MONTREAL	<i>Montreal Urban Aboriginal Community Strategy Network</i>	Comprised of community sector groups, volunteers and government officials working together to improve quality of life of Aboriginal peoples in Montreal.	Steering Committee composed of at least 12 members, including government representatives from all levels, representatives of each Working Committee, and one elder.

Gaps & Challenges

Outstanding Issues

A 2012 literature review commissioned by the Urban Aboriginal Knowledge Network highlighted that “an exclusion from municipal decision-making and questions regarding urban Aboriginal political representation have had a profound effect on urban Aboriginal communities.”⁵ This remains the case to date. During the past few months, both through secondary research and consultations (including with Aboriginal organizations and municipal staff) in Vancouver, Winnipeg, and Ottawa, this task force has identified some key contributors to the existing gap, including that:

- Cities are not sufficiently engaging urban Aboriginal peoples and organizations to build the necessary relationships to achieve reconciliation;
- Urban Aboriginal peoples and organizations lack the mechanisms that could enable them to meaningfully contribute to the policy process writ large; and
- Public service providers and urban Aboriginal peoples lack a sufficient understanding of each other, as it relates to the delivery of services that affect urban Aboriginal populations.

Cities are not sufficiently engaged

In its consultations, the task force heard how important it is for municipal leaders to recognize Aboriginal voices and their cultural contributions to the life of cities. Also, because municipalities are often the most visible and accessible order of government, a relationship with municipal governments can assist urban Aboriginal organizations with having their perspectives heard by provincial and federal governments.

Indeed, urban Aboriginal organizations are the primary social forces that “possess the closest view of the issues and imperatives that are to be framed for policy interventions.”⁶ As such, it is critical that they be engaged meaningfully.

Even so, as Evelyn Peters has noted in *Urban Aboriginal Policy-making in Canadian Municipalities*, the engagement of cities remains imperfect:

“Although cities are currently working to create the mechanisms needed to build appropriate relationships and communication structures, they remain disconnected from the broader policy-making structures, and creative ideas tend to remain at the municipal level. (...) there are ‘good intentions and individual goodwill, but these aren’t getting moved past the discussion table.’”⁷

Ultimately, while there is no obligation set out constitutionally for cities to consult on matters such as service delivery, policy that is informed by the community involved is likely to be much more effective, and the mechanisms for that to take place could be improved.

⁵ Urban Aboriginal Knowledge Network (2012). Literature Review on Urban Aboriginal Peoples. National Association of Friendship Centres.

⁶ Peters, E. (Ed.). (2012). Urban Aboriginal policy making in Canadian municipalities. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, p. 152-3.

⁷ Ibid., p. 154.

Urban Aboriginal peoples and organizations lack the mechanisms to contribute

The task force's discussions with Aboriginal service organizations highlighted an important distinction between "consultations and invitations" and "co-production" of policy. For any issue, the latter involves an honest and open partnership from the stage of problem definition through to evaluation of impacts from a policy or program. In general, "consultation" is better developed but "co-production" remains lacking.

To address this gap, the task force's research highlighted an important theme around the need for **mechanisms** that can facilitate more opportunities for urban Aboriginal people to have input both in planning for the delivery of services that directly affect them, and in civic processes more generally. As noted previously, existing models usually entail both a structure that brings together urban Aboriginal organizations, and a city-level formal consultation mechanism that brings together urban Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal representatives to support decisions by City Council. The next step for cities is to reflect on both successful and unsuccessful initiatives.

The task force also heard that while service organizations may be an important conduit for input, they do not necessarily represent the whole answer for a more generalized involvement of the urban Aboriginal community. Ultimately, the goal is a structuring mechanism whereby the urban Aboriginal community and the partnering city can jointly discuss and address issues of concern. There may be opportunities to consider the development of three- to five-year urban Aboriginal community plans, with measurable goals to guide progress, around which the city and its urban Aboriginal partners can coalesce.

There is a lack of understanding on all sides...

Another common theme from the task force's consultations concerns the lack of knowledge by public service providers, as well as by the broader non-Aboriginal population, of urban Aboriginal peoples' cultures and lived experiences.

Indeed, the Urban Aboriginal Peoples Study found that:

*"There is a significant gap between Aboriginal peoples' socio-economic reality and the perceptions of non-Aboriginal urban Canadians (...). Most notably, almost half of non-Aboriginal urban Canadians have never read or heard anything about Indian residential schools, a situation that appears to have changed little following the federal government's official apology in June 2008."*⁸

Nonetheless, the study also reported that despite many non-Aboriginal urban Canadians having limited knowledge of Aboriginal peoples and issues, they demonstrate a desire to learn more.

It is worth emphasizing how much recognition and ceremony matter in that regard. Relationships with Aboriginal communities will be more effective if they are based on awareness and understanding of Aboriginal cultures, practices, histories, and protocols. The inclusion of Aboriginal ceremonies and storytelling at civic meetings and events promotes a sense of recognition and belonging that is both symbolic and expresses desire for Aboriginal contributions to the conversations. This means that those engaged in policy-making and program delivery in areas that affect urban Aboriginal peoples should have opportunities to gain enhanced awareness of, and receive feedback from, those they serve.

⁸ Environics Institute (2010). *Urban Aboriginal Peoples Study*, p. 142.

...and this dynamic extends to service delivery

The Urban Aboriginal Peoples Study found that while many urban Aboriginal peoples reported positive interactions with non-Aboriginal services (e.g. banks and credit unions, employment and training services, health care, and elementary and secondary schools), urban Aboriginal peoples with low-income status or lesser educational attainment reported negative experiences with non-Aboriginal services to a much greater degree. Significant minorities noted negative experiences with social housing, social assistance, and, particularly, the child welfare system.⁹

In many cases, the task force heard that services are not delivered with sensitivity to urban Aboriginal peoples' cultures and lived experiences. Conversely, understanding needs and perspectives is at the core of productive relationships, and a critical component of "co-production."

There are early examples of promising initiatives in that area. British Columbia, through its Off-Reserve Aboriginal Action Plan, initiated a review of policies and programs to identify potential impacts on urban Aboriginal populations. Seeking to align program delivery across agencies, the first phase of the plan involved a program review of 653 general programs and 120 Aboriginal-specific programs. Of those programs reviewed, 106 policies and/or strategies involved possible impacts on the off-reserve Aboriginal population.

Overall, while positive steps have been taken, initiatives have yet to achieve a full partnership in planning for the delivery of services that affects urban Aboriginal populations, and more generally in contributing to civic processes.

⁹ Environics Institute (2010) *Urban Aboriginal Peoples Study*, p. 82.

Insights & Recommendations

Through our journey, we have received insights and recommendations for ways to address the gap. We are grateful for the work that has gone before us, and to the Canadians who have shared their time and wisdom with us.

1 } Establish effective channels, structures, and protocols for cities to better engage with urban Aboriginal partners

All orders of government face challenges in identifying the urban Aboriginal "voice." Early models for urban Aboriginal peoples' engagement at the city level show promise, but more is required to develop and scale them.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Cities can and should play a proactive role in setting up the mechanisms and building the relationships to facilitate greater voice of urban Aboriginal peoples in city-level policy processes.
- There is a role for an organization such as the Federation of Canadian Municipalities to develop a systematic repository of cities' and urban Aboriginal partners' lessons learned in that area.
- In collaboration with the urban Aboriginal community, initiatives to build, develop, scale up, and fund the models that have proven to work should be undertaken.
- Three- to five-year urban Aboriginal community plans, with measurable goals to guide progress, can serve to anchor partnerships.

2} Increase two-way education & awareness

Our engagement with representatives from municipalities and urban Aboriginal organizations has highlighted the lack of two-way education and awareness. To bridge this gap, municipalities can explore initiatives to foster greater awareness and build relationships between municipal employees, local First Nations, and urban Aboriginal peoples.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- In consultation with urban Aboriginal partners, it is recommended that cities support opportunities for municipal employees to gain cultural understanding and insight into the experiences of the Aboriginal peoples they serve, and, where appropriate, a greater awareness and understanding of local Aboriginal cultures, practices, and protocols.
- Conversely, urban Aboriginal peoples should have opportunities to learn about and engage with the municipal governance culture, structures, and policies that affect them.

3} Take steps that enable service-delivery agencies to take into account impacts on urban Aboriginal populations and tailor approaches to the population served

Public services that reflect the needs and cultures of the populations served, embed a culturally appropriate manner of delivery (for instance, reflecting sensitivity to personal histories of Residential School survivorship), and that are targeted to community needs, will be more efficient. The first step in this process entails a systematic review of impacts, leveraging the front-line experiences of Aboriginal service providers.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- It is recommended that, in consultation with urban Aboriginal peoples, provincial government agencies and ministries responsible for service delivery review policies and programs to identify potential impacts on urban Aboriginal populations.
- Specifically, other Canadian provinces may learn from British Columbia's experience surveying and reviewing existing service delivery mandates. It is recommended that this approach be replicated.

4} Embed territorial & cultural recognition

Reconciliation is an ongoing process that engages broader Canadian society in understanding Aboriginal identities, perspectives, and contributions to the Canadian narrative. While much of it takes place at a level that is broader than the city, there are some key steps that cities can take to promote recognition and belonging.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- In consultation with Aboriginal peoples, it is recommended that cities consider embedding, where appropriate, territorial and cultural recognition for Aboriginal peoples in special events and in the opening of Council deliberations.
- It is also recommended that cities learn and build on Vancouver's experience as a City of Reconciliation to promote reconciliation as a foundation of city governance, and embed it in city life.

Conclusion

This report is part of an ongoing journey. Aspiring to a broader reconciliation, reflecting our shared history and future together, we believe that Canada's cities can be a focal point for discussion, and this requires a partnership with urban Aboriginal peoples. We hope that what we have heard can guide others in starting that dialogue. The project of reconciliation will not be easy or finite. However, by openly and patiently learning about each other, we will build a better Canada.

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AWIDER CIRCLE

ABORIGINAL VOICES
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The artwork on the cover of this report is a mural entitled "Reflections of the Indigenous Sprawl", which was created by Native youth participants in the Overly Creative Minds arts studio at the Urban Native Youth Association, under the guidance of artist and OCM Coordinator Marie Wustner. The mural was exhibited as part of the "Claiming Space: Voices of Urban Aboriginal Youth" exhibit at the University of British Columbia's Museum of Anthropology from June 2014 to January 2015.