

## Editorial

# Aboriginal Canadians - Issues and Challenges: An Editorial Introduction

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The United Nations has ranked Canada as one of the best countries to live in the world over the past two decades. In 2009, Canada was ranked fourth after Norway, Australia and Iceland. However, Aboriginal Canadians are not enjoying the benefits of living in a highly developed and prosperous country. In 2006, the national unemployment rate in Canada was 6.6%, while that of Aboriginal Canadians was 14.8%. Similarly, in the same year, there was substantial difference in average employment income between Aboriginal Canadians and the rest of Canada (Table 1). Kendall (2001) identified the loss of land, low educational attainment, cultural genocide, and job market discriminations as the main factors responsible for poor economic status of Aboriginal Canadians.

**Table 1:** Socio-economic status of Aboriginal Canadians and the rest of Canada, 2006.

	Canada	Total Aboriginal	Indians	Métis	Inuit
Employment Rate (%)	62.4	53.7	48.2	63.1	48.9
Unemployment Rate (%)	6.6	14.8	18.0	10.0	20.3
Average Empl. Income (CD\$)	51,221	39,942	37,356	42,373	45,514
Median Empl. Income (CD\$)	41,401	34,940	32,533	37,273	40,829
Govt. Transfer payments as % of income	11.1	18.1	21.8	13.8	17.7
Lone parents households (%)	4.6	8.2	9.1	6.6	7.5

**Source:** Statistics Canada (2008) 2006 Census of Population, Statistics Canada catalogue no. 97-559-XCB2006008.

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The plight of Aboriginal people is not unique to Canada. Globally, there are over 370 million Aboriginal people living in Africa, the Americas, Asia, Europe and the Pacific (International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs, 2010). Most of these people are impoverished and marginalized. In 2001, in Australia for example, unemployment rate for Aboriginal people was 20.0%, compared to 7.2% for non-Aboriginal Australians and average household income for Aboriginal Australians was 60% of non-Aboriginals (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2001). Pearson (2000) attributed low economic status of Aboriginal Australians to absence of commercial enterprises in Aboriginal communities. More importantly, since Aboriginal communities in Australia are scattered over large geographic area, per capita cost for providing basic needs is extremely high.

To improve the living conditions of Aboriginal people in the world, different initiatives have been adopted by various governments. In Canada, since the 1960s, the federal and provincial governments have implemented several policies which are designed to improve the socio-economic status of Aboriginal Canadians (Saku, 2002). "From segregated reserves, the encouragements of assimilation, legal enfranchisement to residential schools, Aboriginal peoples and communities have been promised that some government program or other would end their isolation from the Canadian mainstream and provide them with the ability to prosper within Canada" (Coates and Morrison, 2008, 105). The Royal Commission on Aboriginal People (RCAP) (1996) identified outmigration to urban centers, business development, sectoral development, human resource development, and community development as policy initiatives which have been implemented by the federal government. Unfortunately, these policies have failed to change the socio-economic status of Aboriginal Canadians. This special issue of *Geography Research Forum* focuses on a variety of issues confronting Aboriginal Canadians.

The first paper of the special issue written by Nkongolo-Bakenda, Anderson, Kayseas and Camp deals with the framework for conflict resolution between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Canadians. Since historic contact between Europeans and Aboriginal people in Canada, natural resource ownership has been a major source of conflict between the two groups. According to the authors, natural resource accessibility and resistance by Aboriginal Canadians to assimilate into the larger Euro-Canadian society are the principal factors responsible for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal conflict. After an extensive literature review on Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal conflicts in Africa and Canada, the authors recommended two frameworks for resolving conflict: 1) the assertiveness of Aboriginal values and interests and 2) recognition of Aboriginal values and interests by external stakeholders. Even though this paper proposes an excellent theoretical framework for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal conflict resolution, it is clear that there is the need for further research on this endemic issue.

The second paper focuses on Modern Land Claim Agreements (MLCAs) in Canada. Since the 1970s, MLCAs have been used as a means of resolving legal

land ownership between Aboriginal Canadians and the federal government. The 1973 James Bay and Northern Quebec Agreement was the first MLCA achieved in Canada. Since then, several agreements have been achieved in Northern British Columbia, Yukon, Northwest Territories and Nunavut. Apart from establishing a legal framework for land ownership, MLCAs are designed to promote economic development as well as regional and community government. Dokis' paper examines the geo-political impact of the 1993 Sahtu Dene and Métis Modern Land Claim Agreement. The author maintains that achieving this land claim agreement fundamentally changed the structure of existing political institutions by shifting decision making authority on natural resource exploitation from community elders to board of directors of land corporations. Unfortunately, this new arrangement is creating conflict between traditional and modern political institutions.

The next three papers deal with environmental issues confronting Aboriginal Canadians. Liénafa and Martin's paper focuses on the impact of Churchill River Diversion (CRD) hydro-electric project on South Indian Lake Aboriginal community in northern Manitoba. According to the authors, the CRD hydro-electric development did not only create significant environmental problems like territorial flooding but also had devastating economic impact on the people of South Indian Lake. More importantly, four hundred people relocated from the community for lack of future economic livelihood.

Notwithstanding the economic hardships and environmental problems created by CRD, Liénafa and Martin indicated that after residents of O-Pipon-Na-Piwin Cree Nation (OPCN) achieved reserve status in 2005, they initiated very successful community projects which include housing privatization, survival weekends, Windigo Wander'ers, and Ke-We-Ka-Pa-We-Tan gathering. These projects are expected to promote community economic and social development and their success proves that Aboriginal Canadians are capable of initiating projects without federal or provincial government involvement.

Smith, Luginaah, and Lockridge paper examines the impact of environmental pollution on Aamjiwnaang people of the Sarnia's 'Chemical Valley' in Ontario. According to the authors, even though the immediate environments where Aboriginal people reside are prone to environmental destruction and pollution, little research has been undertaken on the relationship between Aboriginal people and their physical environment. Based on the theory of therapeutic landscapes, Smith, Luginaah and Lockridge examine the relationship between Aamjiwnaang First Nation and their land "Mother Earth". They concluded that the people of Aamjiwnaang First Nation are seriously concerned about the health of their "Mother Earth" and therefore involved in therapeutic selectivity of their environment. To enhance the confidence of Aamjiwnaang First Nation in using their "Mother Earth", the authors proposed extensive environmental cleanup and the creation of an indoor recreational facility.

The next paper shifts the focus from an actual environmental problem to a potential one. Pittman's paper examines the potential problems of climate change among

Aboriginal Canadians. Specifically, this paper focuses on existing sensitivities to, and coping capacities with climate change of two Saskatchewan First Nation communities, the James Smith and Shoal Lake First Nations. Pittman selected these communities because of their location within the transitional zone between grassland and the boreal forest. He concluded that even though social capital and local government are important in dealing with change, Aboriginal knowledge and the experience of community leaders are important in dealing with future climate change adaptation. Together, the three papers provide interesting perspectives on environmental issues facing Aboriginal Canadians.

Unlike the previous three papers, the next paper deals with the potential economic and social impacts of establishing a national park on land traditionally owned by Lutsel K'e Dene First Nation. Bennett, Lemelin and Ellis' paper examines local perceptions on the creation of a national park near a remote northern Aboriginal community. Based on extensive open-ended ethnographic interviews, the authors concluded that residents of Lutsel K'e Dene First Nation have positive perceptions on the proposed national park. Some of their positive perceptions include enhancement in community economic development, improvement in social conditions, support for traditional lifestyle, cultural revitalization, and increased local participation in decision making and territorial control. The paper however failed to explore the negative perceptions of creating the national park.

In contrast to the potential economic impact of creating a national park on residents of Lutsel K'e Dene First Nation, Graci's paper focuses on current practices, benefits, and problems of Aboriginal ecotourism in Ontario, Canada. According to Graci, notwithstanding the economic and social contributions of tourism to Aboriginal economic development in Canada, Aboriginal ecotourism has been neglected. Using a snowball sampling technique, the author interviewed academicians, Aboriginal Chiefs, Aboriginal associations, representatives of provincial and federal government agencies and tourism operators. From these interviews, Graci identified cultural and natural resource preservation as important benefits of promoting Aboriginal ecotourism. Despite these benefits, Aboriginal ecotourism development is hampered by product development and marketing, bureaucratic bottlenecks and lack of education. The author concluded that achieving the full potential of Aboriginal ecotourism in Ontario requires strong commitment from stakeholders.

Saku's paper concludes the issue with substantial shift in content from Aboriginal ecotourism to development theories and the Canadian North. According to Saku, the Canadian North is home to a large number of Aboriginal Canadians. As a periphery, the region is confronted with development issues. The paper examines a selected number of development theories used to explain development issues in the Canadian North. Specifically, Saku's paper focuses on development-underdevelopment, core-periphery, dependency, dualism, and bottom-up theories. According to the author, while development-underdevelopment theory was popular among researchers in the early years of resource exploitation in the Canadian North, the

core-periphery theory became popular in the 1970s and 1980s. There was a paradigm shift from core-periphery to dualism in the 1980s with the emergence of dual economic system (traditional and modern) in the region. Saku further noted that the bottom-up theory is presently appropriate in examining development issues in the Canadian North because of the evolution of Modern Land Claim Agreements.

Even though the papers presented in this special issue focus on a broad spectrum of Aboriginal issues in Canada, each paper provides a unique perspective. From a theoretical perspective on Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal conflict resolution to Modern Land Claim Agreements in northern Canada, impact of Churchill River Diversion (CRD) hydro-electric project on residents of South Indian Lake Aboriginal community, impact of environmental pollution on Aamjiwnaang First Nation, the potential problems of climate change on Aboriginal Canadians, the potential economic and social impacts of establishing a national park on traditionally owned Aboriginal land, Aboriginal ecotourism, and regional development theories in the Canadian North, the special issue provides an excellent understanding on issues and challenges confronting Aboriginal Canadians. Whether the issue is regional or national in scope, the goal of this special issue is to provoke interest in research on Aboriginal Canadians.

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