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Report urges new thinking for Northern Ontario

By [Sudbury Star Staff](#)

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New thinking is needed if Northern Ontario is ever going to restructure and reinvigorate its economy, a new report from the Northern Policy Institute suggests.

Author Charles Conteh, a Brock University professor, said in his study, *Economic Zones of Northern Ontario: City-Regions and Industrial Corridors*, that Northern communities must be given the tools to control their economic development.

He said the top-down approach of senior levels of government towards Northern Ontario hasn't -- and won't -- work.

"Due to the significant diversity between communities in Northern Ontario, policies and planning aimed at addressing specific economic challenges are more valuable than one-size-fits-all, top-down programs," Conteh said.

"Economic zones offer an opportunity for upper levels of government to frame a new kind of partnership guided by the priorities of communities."

Conteh said it's a mistake to think of Northern Ontario as one or two regions, or as five urban-centred regions, because they do not reflect the reality of northern diversity.

Even approaches based on census districts do not allow for strategic thinking at the local level reflective of economic, demographic and geographic realities, he said.

Instead, he argues Northern Ontario is made up of 11 distinct economic zones or clusters.

To be truly effective, local governance, economic development planning and government investment activities must recognize and allow for this diversity of communities, Conteh said. According to the report, economic development does not need rigid governance structures, but fluid platforms to address specific needs and explore shared opportunities.

He said other studies suggest that "unless communities feel a sense of control over their own socio-economic destiny, and unless they are a critical part of deliberations about identifying assets and challenges and prioritizing investment decisions, no amount of government blueprint or plan for economic growth could mobilize fully the talents and efforts of local actors.

"Communities do not always need lofty blueprints of growth plans. Instead, they need the governance infrastructure designed at the local scale to enable them to mobilize ideas and resources to ensure a sustainable future for themselves, and the partnership of upper levels of government to help them make the necessary investment in realizing those ideas."

Economic Zones of Northern Ontario: City-Regions and Industrial Corridors identifies and describes 11 economic zones in Northern Ontario, broken down into two types: "city-regions" and "industrial corridors."

The six "city-regions" -- Sudbury, Thunder Bay, Sault Ste. Marie, Timmins, North Bay and Kenora -- are centred around major urban areas.

The five "industrial corridors" -- Temiskaming Shores, Greenstone-Marathon, Fort Frances, Parry Sound, and Manitoulin Island -- are centred around a collection of relatively smaller, but geographically proximate, communities sharing similar sectors, assets, and needs.

Conteh actually identifies a 12th region, the Far North. But that region (or possibly "regions") is so different that it is excluded from the current analysis.

"The Far North is a unique region with special needs based on issues of access, distance, and density," Conteh said.

The study relied on in-depth interviews with key actors across Northern Ontario to confirm the existence, strength, and breadth of particular economic sectors within their communities. These interviews were then supplemented with content analysis of economic sector drivers identified in the strategic economic growth plans of the various communities, and population estimates from census data.

The complete report is available at www.northernpolicy.ca.

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More info

About the Northern Policy Institute:

Northern Policy Institute is Northern Ontario's independent think tank. It performs research, collects and disseminates evidence, and identifies policy opportunities to support the growth of sustainable Northern communities. Its operations are located in Thunder Bay, Sault Ste. Marie, and Sudbury. It seeks to enhance Northern Ontario's capacity to take the lead position on socio-economic policy that impacts Northern Ontario, Ontario, and Canada as a whole.

About the Author

Charles Conteh is Research Director and Associate Professor of Public Policy and Management in the Department of Political Science at Brock University. From 2007 to 2009, he served as Assistant Professor in the Department of Political Science at Lakehead University. Over the past 10 years, he has focused his research on public policy responses to the economic challenges of various regions, including Northern Ontario. His broader research interests are in the areas of Canadian and comparative public policy, public management, political economy and governance.

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