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Income guarantee program must include First Nations: Report

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A new report from the Northern Policy Institute warns that implementation of a basic income guarantee program for Ontario may have unforeseen negative consequences for First Nations communities without pilot-testing, sustained government commitment, and significant engagement with First Nations.

As the province moves ahead with its BIG pilot, NPI has released the first report in its BIG series, Basic Income Guarantee and First Nations: Cautions for Implementation, by Gayle Broad and Jessica Nadjiwon-Smith, who have identified several key areas of concern.

According to Broad and Nadjiwon-Smith, First Nations communities differ substantially from non-Indigenous municipalities, with exceedingly diverse histories, cultures, and contexts – including vastly differing geographies, and remote access to urban centres and services. The report adds that Indigenous peoples in Ontario face different challenges in addressing social, economic and health indicators.

“Due to complexities facing First Nations, the face of poverty in these communities differs substantially from that in other municipalities and rural communities in Ontario,” Broad said in a statement. “Because of this, it is unclear whether First Nations will gain the same benefits from a BIG as other communities in the province might.”

Beyond unique challenges related to poverty, the report identifies social assistance administration and First Nations autonomy as other factors for consideration, arguing the elimination of local administration could lead to a loss of culturally appropriate service provision and limit the range of services available for First Nations community members.

The report also cautions that Canadian governments historically have underfunded and sometimes undermined programs in First Nations, and questions what evidence supports the likelihood that the implementation of a BIG would be any different.

Broad and Nadjiwon-Smith conclude these concerns may only be definitively answered through pilot-site testing, with a comprehensive evaluation component attached, and proper discussion and engagement with First Nations, cautioning such a commitment should not be extended and then withdrawn.

“Implementing a basic income guarantee in communities that differ so much from other Ontario municipalities requires thoughtful consideration and a great deal of insight that can only be provided through meaningful engagement with First Nations communities themselves,” Broad said.

The paper is the first of a series that will explore the various topics presented at NPI’s Basic Income Guarantee conference in October 2016. Report topics include food security issues, potential models for a BIG pilot, tax implications, and the potential impact on social innovators.

To view presentations from the NPI’s BIG conference and explore comments and feedback from participants, visit www.northernpolicy.ca/big.