



Commentary No.36 | November 2019

2017 State of the North Conference Report - Timmins, ON

**You, Me and Our 780,000 Neighbours:
How Northern Ontario can Continue
to Work Toward a Sustainable and
Prosperous Future**

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Editor's note

Since the 2017 conference, several key developments have been made in the various areas addressed in this report.

With regard to the immigration file, Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada introduced the Rural and Northern Immigration pilot (RNIP) which is a community-driven program that seeks to encourage immigration to selected communities (Canada 2019). Five communities in Northern Ontario were chosen: Thunder Bay, Sudbury, North Bay, Timmins, and Sault Ste. Marie. In addition to the RNIP, Sudbury was chosen to be a part of the Welcoming Francophone Communities initiative, which aims to ensure Francophone newcomers are welcomed appropriately into a given community (Canada 2019b). Third, the Province of Ontario is introducing the Ontario Regional Immigration Pilot which seeks to encourage immigration to smaller and/or rural communities (Ontario 2019). Finally, changes were made under Ontario Immigrant Nominee Program's Entrepreneur Stream where the investment and net worth thresholds have been lowered (ibid 2019). Similarly, changes were made under the In-Demand Skills Stream whereby the "work experience requirement has been reduced" and NOC codes such as personal support workers were added in order to fill labour market needs (ibid 2019).

Alongside these developments, movement continues to be made in Indigenous economic development such as the creation of the Anishnawbe Business Professional Association. The purpose of this group is "to provide support and advocacy for First Nations entrepreneurs and businesses across Northern Ontario" (CBC News 2019).

On a related note, in communities such as Sioux Lookout, there have been accelerated equity investments which further contribute to the growth and prosperity of Northern Ontario

Additionally Northern Policy Institute would like to acknowledge the following individuals for their contribution to this piece:

DJ Grewal, former Data Analyst

Curtis McKnight, former NOHFC intern

Christina Zefi, former NOHFC intern



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You, Me and Our 780,000 Neighbours: How Northern Ontario can Continue to Work Toward a Sustainable and Prosperous Future

In 2017 Northern Policy Institute (NPI) held its first ever State of the North (SOTN) conference in Timmins, Ontario. The theme focused on 'Responding to Northern Ontario's Demographic Shift' and aimed to bring together decision makers, community leaders, experts, and innovators to explore the state of Northern Ontario from an economic, social, and environmental perspective. Through this knowledge-sharing event, participants could take what they learned and engage in solution-based discussions. During the inaugural two-day event, over 150 decision makers and community leaders from across Ontario's northern regions explored evidence-based solutions to address the demographic challenges facing northern communities, specifically the socio-economic impacts of a shrinking and aging population. In particular, participants considered the roles that migration, engagement with Indigenous communities, and local governance can have on improving the sustainability and growth of the North.

Alongside a presentation on the state of Ontario's northern regions by NPI President and CEO Charles Cirtwill which focused on key social, environmental, and economic indicators to measure growth, the conference hosted three panels and a keynote by Aime Dimatteo, Director General of FedNor. Finally, in addition to these talks, the audience was given an opportunity to participate in a series of table discussions. These responses were then compiled, anonymized, and analyzed at a high level so as to avoid identifying any one individual. These results help inform NPI's research agenda, which relies on engagement with residents across Northern Ontario. Such a process helps us to provide timely and appropriate policy solutions.

Below are the panels, as well as the key points highlighted from each topic. The questions were posited at audience tables after each speaker/panelist group presented.



Local Immigration Pilots

To mitigate the demographic trends that Ontario's northern regions are facing (e.g. an aging population), NPI has emphasized two actions which are necessary. The first is increasing Indigenous participation in the labour market, and second, attract and retain newcomers (immigrants and secondary migrants). Indeed, assuming full employment of the current and projected population, including Indigenous peoples, Northern Ontario still needs thousands of newcomers per year. Naturally we may ask ourselves, "Well, how do we do it?" To answer that, our first panel focused on successful immigration pilots that we could consider replicating here. The panelists were:

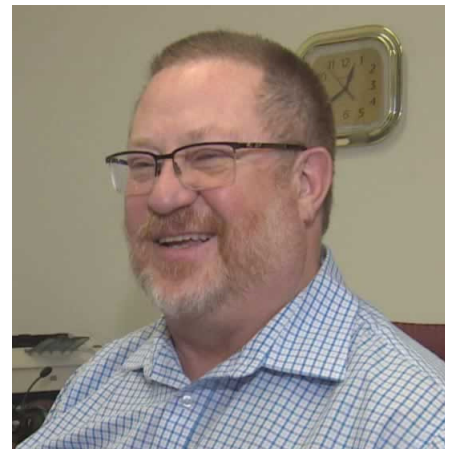
- Suzanne Ley, Executive Director of Corporate Services, Nova Scotia Public Service Commission - Nova Scotia Immigration and Atlantic Immigration Pilot ¹
- Monika Feist, CEO of Success Skills Centre – Employment Assistance for Immigrant Professionals and Skilled Workers
- Ronald Labrecque, Director General of Assemblée communautaire fransaskoise – French Language Immigration



Suzanne Ley



Monika Feist



Ronald Labrecque

Based on the presentations from these panelists, the audience was asked three questions in their table discussions. Below are the response highlights from each question.

Question 1: What lessons from the experiences of the panelists can be applied to Northern Ontario?

- Northern Ontario needs regional control over an immigration Provincial Nominee Program (PNP) system that is designed to specifically address Northern Ontario's needs;
- Northern Ontario could learn from the Success Skills Centre in Manitoba on where the gaps are in our current settlement services;
- The Atlantic Canada and Saskatchewan programs are targeted programs (employer-driven and language-focused, respectively). In Ontario programs are broader. It seems that targeted programs are advantageous.

¹ At the time of the conference, Suzanne was working at the Nova Scotia Office of Immigration

Question 2: If you were imagining the perfect immigration pilot program, what would it look like in Northern Ontario? What, if any, are the barriers to establishing such a program in Northern Ontario?

- The “perfect” immigration pilot program is imagined to be a regional program only for Northern Ontario. The program targets immigrants to match the market needs of Northern Ontario, is stronger in pre-immigration (for example, going to various countries and targeting certain groups), provides a trial period for immigrants to test out their potential life, has a number of settlement and welcoming services to help the migrant and their family, and finally, provides employment services to help spouses find meaningful employment;
- Given the many voices and conflicting views, multiple organizations need to speak with a similar voice for Northern Ontario. Also, smaller communities should partner with larger communities to see how they can help one another. The universities and colleges should also be involved as they attract a number of foreign students;
- Northern Ontario needs to be promoted and marketed in a positive way that showcases more than just the outdoorsy lifestyle: lower cost of living, convenience of urban hubs, sense of community, and the vibrant social life.
- The common barriers identified amongst the table discussions were: lack of collaboration between communities and different organizations; difficulty of transferring credentials for immigrant professionals; the lack of cultural networks and cultural diversity makes it difficult for immigrants to feel welcome; lack of infrastructure and internet coverage; and lack of financial resources;
- Perhaps an immigration program could be developed to attract underemployed individuals and various Francophones throughout the province and country and showcase the various opportunities and strong Francophone communities in Northern Ontario.

Key Action Item

In order to appropriately attract and retain newcomers in Northern Ontario, foundational steps ought to be taken such as reducing silos and understanding the unique labour market needs of northern communities so as to fill gaps through a targeted approach.

Question 3: What role does the broader community play in supporting immigration efforts? Civil society? Individuals? Private sector?

- Every group has a responsibility to promote Northern Ontario and the various opportunities available. Also, it is the responsibility of all parties to make immigrants feel welcome. This could entail communities arranging for weekly events, individuals volunteering to host immigrant families to show them around, the private sector arranging for welcoming activities for new migrants, families, and the company, as well as communities and the private sector providing diversity and cultural training;
- All levels of government have a responsibility to partner with one another and discuss an attraction and retention plan for the region;
- Local Immigration Partnerships, the Francophone Assembly of Ontario, Francophone Association of Municipalities of Ontario, and others should partner with one another to have a common voice for the various groups they represent so that Northern Ontario's immigration efforts are aligned.



Growing Together in Our Shared Economy

In a 2014 national survey by the Canadian Council for Aboriginal Business (CCAB), the majority of Indigenous small business owners stated that partnerships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous businesses, local communities and suppliers are key factors in the success of their own business (CCAB 2015, 9). Indeed, the economic and social benefits of these partnerships play a valuable role in the growth of Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities in Northern Ontario. As such, NPI brought together the following experts to discuss how to encourage these relationships.



Dawn Madahbee Leach

- Dawn Madahbee Leach, General Manager of Waubetek Business Development Corporation – Engaging Indigenous People in Regional Development
- David Abbott, Director of Community & Indigenous Relations at Bruce Power - Aboriginal Business: An Evolving Landscape ²

As before, the audience was asked to discuss three questions.

Question 1: What are the barriers to the development of partnerships between Indigenous communities and non-Indigenous communities?

- Misconceptions about one another due to lack of knowledge and trust. As well there is fear of rejection on both sides which can lead to hesitation;
- Geographical issues – remote Indigenous communities are isolated. As well, a lack of infrastructure further limits the development of partnerships;
- Lack of consent;
- Not enough collaboration opportunities between Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities;
- Lack of economic development organizations;
- Political continuity in Indigenous communities.

Question 2: What is the role of the private sector in this discussion? How can we encourage the private sector to support initiatives that foster positive outcomes for Indigenous communities and non-Indigenous communities?

- The role of the private sector is to educate their employees on Indigenous history and culture – it should be mandatory just like health and safety training;
- Private sector can provide their expertise through partnerships. The partnerships can be for services, knowledge sharing, mentorship and assistance. As well, they can provide support and development opportunities for neighbouring Indigenous communities;
- Private sector can help foster the creation of more urban reserves in Northern Ontario.

Question 3: How could new, regionally based governments contribute to growing the shared economy?

- Create a Northern Ontario caucus to reflect the North;
- Regional governments could facilitate cooperation by ensuring Indigenous communities are at the table, reminding partners of their duty to consult, reminding groups about Indigenous and non-Indigenous priorities, and facilitating the sharing of revenue/access to funding;
- Government resource revenue sharing.

² At the time of the conference, David was working for the CCAB.



David Abbott

Key Action Item

In tandem with increasing understanding and awareness of cultures, issues and priorities amongst Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities, relationship building ought to be the first step in any initiative in order to ensure not just sustainability, but meaningful reconciliation too. Specifically, this includes consultation throughout a project, ensuring partnerships are equitably profitable, increasing representation in regional governance structures, developing appropriate infrastructure, and purchasing local products.

Decision Devolution to Northern Ontario

Good governance is key to economic success (MacKinnon 2016, 5). For a large geographic area such as Northern Ontario with differing economic and social needs, a sustainable and robust governance structure is integral to growth across our communities. Of course, given these differences, should decision-making be more in the hands of those who are on the ground? The following panelists explored this question:



Dr. David Robinson

- David Robinson, Professor at Laurentian University – Devolution: Barriers and Realistic Solutions for the BS&L (Boreal Shield and Lowlands)
- David MacKinnon, NPI Senior Fellow – Decision Devolution in Northern Regions

Below are the three questions audience members were asked to discuss.

Question 1: In what areas of policy and decision-making would you like to see more power devolved to Northern Ontario's regions (i.e. education, health etc.)?

- Social services delivery ought to be uniquely shaped by the residents of Northern Ontario. Specifically, there could be capacity and efficiency gains for health service providers and education boards as a result of devolution.
- An independent statistical body for Northern Ontario is needed to provide granular data and statistics at the community level.
- Transportation infrastructure authority ought to be devolved to improve transportation efficiency in Northern Ontario.

Question 2: What governance structures might be effective in Northern Ontario? Are there any structures currently in place that could act as a starting point?

- Municipal organizations such as the Northwestern Ontario Municipal Association and the Federation of Northern Ontario Municipalities could act as a good starting point for governance at the local level.
- Social service providers such as Local Health Integration Networks and District Social Services Association Boards could act as starting points for a devolution of health service provision.
- Going forward, current governance structures should work within programs and frameworks that are already in place to improve the standards of local governance. Making improvements to the existing structures that are already in place could be done applying best practices from governance within and outside Northern Ontario.

Question 3: Could there be any negative and/or unintended consequences of devolution of more decision-making authority to Northern Ontario? How could these be addressed?

- A lack of financial resources and funding would make it hard for Northern Ontario communities to sustain themselves if devolution was to take place. There would need to be changes to current funding models.
- Devolution runs the risk of causing conflict between communities in Northern Ontario. Larger communities may overshadow the concerns of the smaller communities.
- If devolution were to take place, there would need to be small pilot projects first to test how well it works. Moving too quickly to achieve devolution could backfire.



David MacKinnon

Key Action Item

The governance structures in Northern Ontario that are already in place ought to be improved upon first. At the very most, pilot projects could be initiated to test whether the devolution of decision-making power in Northern Ontario is a viable and sustainable option for the future. Devolving power too quickly could cause intercommunity conflict and weaken the financial capacity of some communities in Northern Ontario.

Conclusion

Everyone has an important role to play in the future of Northern Ontario; whether it be Indigenous and non-Indigenous partners collaborating on a local business initiative, a family that organizes a dinner to welcome newcomers to their town, or a community leader using municipal data for better decision making. Indeed, as participants in the first SOTN conference identified, these and other practices can impact the economic and social growth of our northern communities. NPI will continue to collect and disseminate evidence of these practices so that we may not only highlight policy opportunities, but ways we can contribute to a sustainable Northern Ontario.



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Northern Policy Institute is Northern Ontario's independent think tank. We perform research, collect and disseminate evidence, and identify policy opportunities to support the growth of sustainable Northern Communities. Our operations are located in Thunder Bay and Sudbury. We seek 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.

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