

FIRST NATION PERCEPTIONS OF RENEWABLE ENERGY INITIATIVES AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT IN NORTHERN ONTARIO

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Introduction

Over ¾ of First Nation communities in Canada are located near forested areas. Recent structural changes in the forest industry have left many forest-reliant communities, both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, struggling for survival and economic sustainability. Related to the decrease in forest activities is the ongoing problem of energy to power communities, particularly remote communities. Renewable energy has the potential to lessen the impact of fossil fuel dependence as an energy source while at the same time providing economic benefits to communities. Since the mandate of the Ontario Green Energy and Green Economy Act of 2009 for the closure of fossil fuel dependent generating stations by 2014 and the accompanying Feed-in-Tariff (FIT) program to facilitate the conversion to renewable energy sources, opportunities for First Nation communities to partake in the transformation to a green economy has become a reality. This research project will look into the perceptions of and gives voice to Aboriginal communities regarding renewable energy projects on First Nation reserve land and traditional territories. It takes a qualitative approach to documenting current First Nation endeavours in the renewable energy sector by examining First Nation experiences with implementing wind, solar, hydroelectric, and bioenergy projects and the associated challenges and benefits resultant from their participation.

Objective & Research Questions

The objective of this research is to document the perceptions and opinions of first Nation communities in relation to renewable energy projects undertaken on reserves and/or traditional territories. The research will also give voice to the First Nation communities within the academy by answering the following research questions.

1. How do First Nations peoples define renewable energy?
2. What benefits would they like to see as a result of their participation in the renewable energy sector (jobs, economic impact, infrastructure, etc.)?
3. What are the community members' opinions, perceptions, and attitudes about emerging renewable energy trends? Are they in favour of these trends? Do they see any drawbacks and if so what are they?
4. What are the decision making processes used currently for Aboriginal economic development. Are these processes satisfactory for First Nations? If not, how should these processes be improved?
5. What are the differences and similarities between the communities in their perceptions towards the relationship between renewable energy and Aboriginal economic development?

Literature Review

Aboriginal peoples generally reject development theories of the past such as dependency and modernization perspectives. Modernization theory prescribes that in order for a group of people to develop they must follow in the footsteps of others whom have already developed. Dependency perspective is based on the assumption that the current hardship of lesser developed nations was a result of the "rise of the First World to its current state of development" and that lesser developed nations could not simply follow in the First World's footsteps in order to gain equal results (Anderson et al. 2006).

In lieu of these two approaches to development, Aboriginal peoples prefer a contingency approach where the group in question have more influence in the decision making and direction the development will follow. They participate more directly in the process and decide to what extent and in which way they wish to pursue economic development. (Newhouse 2004, Smith 2005)

The literature also suggests that renewable energy initiatives do have the potential to benefit First Nation peoples by providing sustainable energy sources (Shahi 2011) and consistent revenue generation (Krupa 2012)

Methodology & Research Design

- The research will use a qualitative approach to gathering, analyzing, and disseminating the data and for addressing the objectives. Focus groups, in-depth interviews, researcher reflexivity, and document review will be used in order to address the research questions.
- A number of case studies of relevant communities that have or are in the process of undertaking renewable energy projects on their reserve lands or traditional territories. Once approval is granted by the First Nation community then data collection will begin (Ethics approval has already been granted by Lakehead University Ethics Board)
- Recruitment of potential research participants will include convenience, judgment, and snowball sampling. Participants will include but not limited to: leadership, Elders, natural resource users (traditional and non-traditional), economic development employees, environment employees, and other interested community members.
- Great care will be taken in conducting research with First Nation communities and ensuring that no unnecessary harm towards research participants and respect for persons, concern for welfare, and justice is observed. Research in the past has not always benefited Indigenous peoples as noted by Smith (1990):

A continuing legacy of what has come to be taken for granted as a natural link between the term 'indigenous; (or its substitutes) and 'problem' is that many researchers, even those with the best intentions, frame their research in ways that assume that the locus of a particular research problem lies with the indigenous individual or community rather than with other social or structural issues.

- There is potential for researcher bias as the student researcher is of Ojibway heritage. The usage of reflexivity will assist in identifying potential biases as well as triangulation and seeking out clarification from the participants themselves to ensure what is documented captures its intended meaning.

Renewable Energy

In 2009 Bill 150, the Green Energy and Green Economy Act was passed into law by the Government of Ontario. The Act's main focus was to provide mechanisms for replacing the electricity currently being provided by non-renewable energy sources such as coal with renewable energy alternatives. As such, the Feed-in-Tariff (FIT) and microFit programs were created in order to provide incentive to undertake new renewable energy projects or upgrades of existing initiatives. Of importance to First Nations is the four energy sources falling under microFit: small hydro, wind, solar, and biomass.

The Ontario Provincial Government has also created specific programs in addition to the price adder found in the microFit program in order to facilitate Aboriginal participation. The Aboriginal Energy Partnership Program was designed to provide assistance to interested Aboriginal groups in developing their renewable energy programs and provides services and funding for initial energy development plans, feasibility studies, environmental and technical studies, and general help in navigating the through the entire process. The Aboriginal Loan Guarantee Program's its mandate it to assist interested First Nations through the process of developing a renewable energy project. During consultations before the legislation was developed policy makers were told by Aboriginal participants that lack of capital was a major impediment to their involvement. The ALGP will fund up to 75% of a First Nation's equity into approved projects to a maximum of 50 million dollars per project and includes both transmission and generation projects



Aboriginal Economic Development

There are two main approaches to Aboriginal Economic Development found in the literature from Canada and the United States of America respectively. The Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (RCAP) was completed in 1996. The Harvard Project on American Indian Economic Development was started in 1987. Although sharing some similarities the two approaches are differentiated by approaches by government towards First Nation/Indian relationships. This framework provides a starting point in order to evaluate renewable energy projects and its connection to Aboriginal economic development.

RCAP	HPAIED
1. Respect for Treaty and Aboriginal rights	1. Sovereignty matters
2. Capable Self-government	2. Institutions matter
3. Adequate lands and resources	3. Culture matters
4. Sustainable Economic development	4. Leadership matters

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