

WORLD FORESTRY CONGRESS PAPER

First Nations Forestry Program: An innovative integrated community development partnership approach

By

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Abstract

Canada is home to over 600 First Nation bands from the Atlantic to the Pacific oceans. From time immemorial, forests have been a way of life for First Nations, bringing together cultural, spiritual and social values. They have relied on forests for food, medicine, clothing and shelter. Forests continue to form an essential part of First Nations' well-being, providing economic benefits and fulfilling cultural and spiritual needs for present and future generations.

In 1996, the Government of Canada established the First Nations Forestry Program (FNFP) to help improve economic conditions in First Nation communities. Through this program, First Nations are able to build capacity and assume control of the management of forest resources on reserve lands, establish partnerships, and actively participate in off-reserve forestry and other economic development opportunities.

First Nations are directly involved in the management of this innovative and highly successful program. The program adapts itself to the various local conditions and levels of development of remote communities. The FNFP supports the unique relationship between forests and First Nations by providing a means to create sustainable communities and economic self-sufficiency.

Key words: Traditional ecological knowledge, community empowerment, First Nations, sustainable forest management, economic development, capacity building, partnerships, innovative program management.

1. Introduction

1.1 First Nations in Canada

In Canada, there are 675,000 First Nation people, over 55% of which live in 612 First Nation communities (Indian and Northern Affairs Canada 2002) located across the 10 provinces and 3 territories. There is much diversity; there are 50 Aboriginal languages in Canada that comprise 11 major language families which provide Aboriginal people with a unique cultural and tribal identity (Garvin et al. 2001). Most communities are remote and comprised of a few hundred members to over a thousand members. In general, First Nations are in much more disadvantaged social and economic conditions than the rest of Canadians. The forest is an important source of livelihood and spirituality for Aboriginal people and has always played an important role in the cultural and social lives of Aboriginal people.

There are over 2,300 reserves covering an area of over 3.1 million hectares; about one million hectares of which is forested (Natural Resources Canada 2001). This represents less than 0.3% of the total forested area in Canada. The relative isolation of many First Nation communities often constrains economic opportunities (Indian and Northern Affairs Canada 2000). However, since they are located in areas of abundant forest, there is great potential for forest-related economic development. In Canada, only a small proportion of communities can rely moderately on their forest for their training and economic development. Most reserves are too small to provide self-sufficiency to First Nation communities through forest development.

1.2 The First Nations Forestry Program in Canada

The First Nations Forestry Program (FNFP) was introduced in 1996 to address First Nation forestry development issues and help improve the economic conditions of First Nation communities. This tripartite partnership program is an innovative and proactive federal program that is different from other programs by the following three main characteristics:

- it adapts to the needs and priorities of First Nations at the local level since no First Nation community is at the same level as the others in the curve of forestry development and self-sufficiency.
- it is a very broad program that covers a wide range of admissible activities in line with the different kinds of support needed by communities, ranging from those who have no experience to those who are very experienced in forestry. It is the only program supporting forest management activities on reserve lands.
- a majority of First Nation representatives sit on the management committees of the program at the provincial, territorial and national levels, in partnership with Natural Resources Canada (NRCan) and Indian and Northern Affairs Canada (INAC).

Projects undertaken under the FNFP by First Nations take on a wide variety of forms, such as traditional ecological knowledge studies, on-reserve silviculture activities, integrated forest resources management planning, development of feasibility studies and business plans, training in various aspects of forestry and project management, starting up new business ventures or establishing meaningful forestry relationships with the forest sector, ecotourism, non-timber forest product development, workshops and many other activities that are of importance to First Nation communities.

2. Results

2.1 Social values and impacts

The FNFP is more than just another forestry program, it is also about people, communities, trust, hope, pride, partnerships and opportunities. The unforeseen impacts of projects go beyond improving forest lands or doing business. They have also enhanced the social lifestyle of many individuals, families and communities.

Funding and experience provided by the FNFP have assisted many participants in moving from unemployment to full employment, seeing ideas turn into realities, and implementing community forestry strategies for the long-term benefit of all members. A decrease in some social problems was noted along with an increase in the personal self-esteem of some band members (Natural Resources Canada 1999). Through other projects, the program has helped many young people obtain new skills, hold on to forestry jobs, and have hope in their future in their community.

2.2 Capacity building and participation in the forest economy

First Nations in Canada rely on forests to create employment and provide sustainable jobs to community members in forest management, harvesting, silviculture and the many other employment opportunities derived from forestry. Close to 400 communities (65% of total) have participated in the FNFP from 1996 to 2002. Projects completed had a significant impact on enhancing First Nations' capacity and on-the-job training in forestry-related activities such as forest management planning, forestry practices, silviculture, business development and joint venture partnerships. Over the six-year period, the FNFP has created over 65,000 person-weeks of employment, translating into 4,800 project participants receiving on-the-job training experience. There were 90 business-related feasibility studies undertaken, 114 business plans prepared, and 106 forest management plans prepared (Natural Resources Canada 2002).

Technical and professional forestry activities, including project management and administration, require a specific level of education and training. Although there may be jobs available, the lack of qualified individuals may prevent communities from taking advantage of opportunities. In some communities, even proposal writing is a challenge. Through the FNFP, communities were assisted in developing forestry awareness and capacity by promoting the skill-development triangle of vocational, technical and professional education. The FNFP has supported communities in making significant strides in forestry capacity building. During the course of the

program, over 220 workshops and conferences were held and over 4,000 First Nation forest workers received education and training in various aspects of forestry.

The FNFP has provided relief in some other areas by contributing technical and financial assistance to projects that were aimed at hiring band forestry coordinators and leveraging funding from other sources. A total of over \$24.8 million was leveraged from Band councils, the forest industry and other partners for program projects.

Some communities experience high staff turnover, with people leaving for various reasons. This affects project administration; projects can be delayed or left unfinished. Communities looked to the FNFP to assist them in overcoming transitions in staff turnover. The FNFP supported training initiatives, mentorship programs, internships and hiring expertise until replacements were found or trained.

Some isolated and remote communities may be disadvantaged in many respects, including transportation or access to expertise and services. Unemployment is also higher. The FNFP recognizes the diversity of First Nations across the country and has built-in flexibility to balance regional differences. Program guidelines and project eligibility criteria are adjusted to the province or territory to accommodate regional disparity.

2.3 Traditional ecological knowledge

Traditional ecological knowledge (TEK) is seen as a holistic approach that can help reshape the current forest management model. However, traditional knowledge is not only a source of knowledge; it is a way of life (Garvin et al. 2001).

Through the FNFP, Traditional Land Use and Occupancy Studies (TLUOS) have been completed in several First Nation communities across Canada. When conducting such studies, internal community-based consultation becomes part of an integrated land use plan. In order to develop the plan, the elders, young people, men, women, forestry workers, trappers, campers, craftsmen, plants and berries gatherers, etc., are consulted to determine where traditional activities occur on the landscape. Through a thoughtful and diligent analysis of the land base, one can assess areas based upon the findings of the TLUOS to determine the tradeoffs and best possible use for the land given the values and objectives of the community (Garvin et al. 2001).

2.4 Empowerment and innovative partnership

In general, programs are developed to meet a particular need and certain objectives or commitments originating from specific government policies or priorities. Although First Nations may be consulted while these programs are being discussed or developed, there is an expectation amongst First Nations to be more directly involved in program design and delivery. The FNFP is an example of a federal program that empowers First Nations in a program developed specifically for First Nations.

The management and delivery of the FNFP in each province and territory is the responsibility of Provincial-Territorial Management Committees (PTMC). The PTMC are comprised of a

majority of First Nation representatives in partnership with Natural Resources Canada (NRCan) and Indian and Northern Affairs Canada (INAC). Forest industry representatives, provincial governments and other governmental departments can also be invited. With this majority, First Nations can have a strong influence on the direction of the program. This is innovative empowerment.

In fact, decision-making authority is vested in the PTMC; they set regional program priorities, policies, direction and guidelines, including project funding and approvals. Each PTMC is provided with the flexibility it requires to design and deliver a program that best suits regional and local First Nation forest management needs.

This regional flexibility has resulted in a participation rate that exceeded by three to four times the available FNFP funding. The completion of over 1148 projects has made it possible for First Nations to achieve higher levels of self-sufficiency, sustainable development of reserve forests and income-generating opportunities, including employment (Natural Resources Canada 2002).

2.5 Supporting new relationships

Many First Nations are currently entering into partnerships and joint venture agreements with companies and other agencies operating on traditional lands. The FNFP supports communities in developing these new relationships. In many cases, however, communities realize they do not always have the corporate capacity or business background to maximize the benefits resulting from these relationships. They require business training, board of directors skill development, corporate planning and professional guidance to become equal partners in the partnership agreements. Under the FNFP, 22% of funded projects involved partnerships and joint ventures. The success of these projects went beyond program expectations. New business opportunities were developed after the projects were completed.

3. Discussion

3.1 Evolution of First Nation development in forestry

In the past twenty years, there has been a great deal of progress made in the forestry sector by First Nations. Before 1985, very few First Nations were involved in economic activities related to forestry. From 1986 to 1995, federal programs of Forest Management on Indian Lands, implemented in each province, helped First Nations build capacity in the forestry sector. Communication plans aimed at making First Nation members aware of the socio-economic benefits of being active in forestry. Many First Nations developed their first forest management plan. Harvesting and silviculture operations became more and more organized. Training of silviculture workers began on-reserve. First Nation forestry services were implemented within the communities to ensure the continuity, better planning and recurrence of forestry activities and projects.

Many First Nation communities gradually made their way towards autonomy since federal programs were no longer financing all the costs. In the 1990s, some First Nation organizations negotiated their first contracts for silvicultural activities off-reserve with the forest industry. Meanwhile, other First Nation communities remained inactive in forestry for many different reasons: lack of interest, no forested area on-reserve, other basic social issues, etc.

3.2 Opportunities, main issues and challenges

Since the middle of the 1990s, more First Nation communities have become active in the off-reserve forestry sector. Contracts with the forest industry are not only for silviculture activities but also for harvesting operations off-reserve. More First Nation members have become forestry technicians and registered professional foresters. Even a few First Nation organizations have become co-owners of sawmills in partnership with the forest industry. Provincial policies are beginning to lead the way to open up opportunities to First Nations in the forestry sector.

Despite the continuous progress, there are still many issues and challenges facing First Nation communities. The constraints on economic development in the Canadian forest sector vary considerably from one First Nation community to the other, often because of different internal and external factors. What follows is a brief overview of the current issues and challenges.

Training and retention of aboriginal forest workers is the key to the current and future success of First Nation forestry organizations. Experience should be acquired in performing a variety of forestry activities effectively. An effort could be made to open the doors of the forest industry to First Nation employees while reducing the high turnover rate among workers in First Nation enterprises.

There remains a wide gap in First Nation technical and professional forestry between the project management expertise that is required and the expertise that is available. Although more First Nation young people are attending college and university, the natural resources area is not drawing a proportionate number of students. In some cases, there will not be enough Aboriginal capacity to manage the growing forest land base; non-Aboriginal expertise is presently filling the void.

Management of on-reserve forests has served in the past as a training grounds for silvicultural activities and models of Aboriginal forest development. It created employment for First Nation workers near their place of residence and attracted young people to jobs in forestry. It served to acquire the experience needed to negotiate off-reserve contracts with the forest industry. Most communities that are very active today in forestry used their reserve's forest as a springboard to further development off-reserve. Management of on-reserve forests has been limited in recent years due to the absence of technical support programs and adequate financing. In the future, this support should also take account of the management of territories recognized under land claims agreements.

Access to long-term contracts with the industry to perform a variety of silviculture activities would enable First Nation enterprises to plan their gradual development. At the local level, awareness efforts directed toward the industry are required to create openings and partnership opportunities and to build a climate of mutual trust and understanding.

Although a number of First Nations have been able to access off-reserve provincial Crown lands for timber and other types of harvesting, the majority of First Nations continue to have difficulty receiving permits due to the fact that timber lands are allocated to other parties or due to unavailable quotas in the areas they wish to access.

The grouping of services and sharing of experiences is another significant issue. While some communities have sufficient revenues to have their own forestry service, others would benefit from joining forces and combining their services. Communities would also benefit from sharing their experiences in order to avoid making business start up errors and to develop measures for harmonizing forestry practices with traditional ecological knowledge.

Access to risk capital to start up forest enterprises in the primary and secondary sectors is another issue since the communities have limited financial resources and borrowing power.

First Nations must apply to several federal or provincial programs to support a single forest development project. This increased bureaucracy flowing from the multiplicity of programs results in inadequate support. This is often due to insufficient program funding and narrowly targeted eligibility criteria. The various programs have different objectives, standards, procedures and forms. A single access point for forest project funding applications would facilitate access to programs, reduce the time spent dealing with paperwork, and promote effective collaboration.

4. Conclusion

We have underlined the fact that an economic development program, such as the FNFP, has major cultural, human and social impacts that are often overlooked in program design and evaluation. Unfortunately, no studies are available to assess those impacts. We hope that in the future, human, cultural and social impacts will become an integrated part of the assessment and design of any program.

The forestry experience and development potential of First Nation communities in Canada vary considerably from one community to the other. Some communities have already reached a degree of maturity that has enabled them to build partnerships with the forest industry, while others are still relatively new to this sector. It has been our experience that the support offered must be consistent with the communities' rate of progress toward development and entrepreneurial maturity. We attribute some of the FNFP success to this critical aspect. Assistance programs must move away from the standard model toward a broader, more flexible and more comprehensive approach with a continued direct implication of First Nations in the orientation and implementation of the programs.

The FNFP is an innovative and highly successful program that involves First Nations directly in the management of the program and adapts to various local conditions and levels of development of remote communities. Thus, the FNFP's basic approach and experience could be applied to communities of many countries. The FNFP supports the unique relationship between forests and First Nations by providing a means to creating sustainable communities and economic self-sufficiency. The FNFP is well positioned to cope with the emerging issues and challenges facing First Nations with a desire to become active participants in Canada's forest sector.

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