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# MVAEC Potlatch Economy Backgroundner

Bridging Indigenous Collective  
Impact with the Indigenous  
Psychology of Poverty



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## BACKGROUND

MVAEC operates from the understanding that the Aboriginal population in Canada consists of the First Nations, Metis, and Inuit peoples. The 2016 census Statistics Canada reaffirms that the Aboriginal population in Canada is the fastest growing population across Canada. Since 2006, the Aboriginal population has grown by 42.5%—more than four times the growth rate of the non-Aboriginal population over the same period. According to population projections, the number of Aboriginal people will continue to grow quickly. In the next two decades, the Aboriginal population is likely to exceed 2.5 million persons<sup>i</sup>.

Growth for the Aboriginal population on and off-reserve is projected to continue growing. Policy and social planning needs to reflect this in long-term planning. Canada is making progress in social reconciliation, but is not in terms of material reconciliation. Social and material reconciliation can intersect in the lives of the urban Aboriginal population, when disproportionate disparity gaps close in housing and education statistics. Failing to do so marginalizes the desire of Aboriginal people to be self-determining.

## HOUSING

In matters of housing, of the 1,673,785 people who reported an Aboriginal identity on the 2016 Census for the housing conditions of Aboriginal people in Canada, 324,900 lived in a dwelling that was in need of major repairs. This group accounted for one-fifth (19.4%) of the total Aboriginal population in Canada. In comparison, 6.0% of the non-Aboriginal population reported living in a dwelling in need of major repairs<sup>ii</sup>.

MVAEC can play a crucial role in material reconciliation for the urban Aboriginal population, by more clearly identifying housing goals to advocate with and for non-profit MVAEC members. In addition to identifying dwellings in need of major repairs as a target for reconciliation. Moreover, by

collaborating with partners to identify appropriate targets to close the gap between the 19.4% and 6% inequity.

MVAEC can also advocate for other issues related to housing, such as development designs that reflect the diverse housing needs of the urban Aboriginal population. Designs that reduce overcrowded housing as a result of two problems. The first problem being affordability, and the second problem having to do with room shortages.

1,673,780 Aboriginal people participated in the 2016 census for issues related to housing. 324,900 lived in a dwelling that was in need of major repairs. 19.4% of Aboriginal people fall into this category compared to only 6% of non-Aboriginal people. MVAEC's 10-year housing strategy could contribute an opportunity to close the gap in housing suitability for the urban Aboriginal population across Metro Vancouver.

Furthermore, Statistics Canada has included data related to bedroom shortfalls. Bedroom shortfalls can be understood as a family living in a dwelling that does not have the appropriate number of rooms for the family: A common law couple with two or more children living in a bachelor suite or one-bedroom dwelling. 11.5% of Aboriginal people lived in a dwelling with a one-bedroom shortfall. 557,085 (4%) lived in a dwelling with a two-bedroom shortfall. 224,945 (2%) Aboriginal people lived in a dwelling with a three or more-bedroom shortfall. These stats tell us that Aboriginal housing and non-Aboriginal housing designs don't reflect the kinship structures of Aboriginal people.

Another factor that needs collective change across sectors is housing affordability for the urban Aboriginal population. As a hub organization, the MVAEC Board of Directors and Council, along with partners and allies, would benefit by sharing a definition of housing affordability across the housing spectrum. One strategy could be to define housing affordability as a goal for MVAEC, along with a specified target MVAEC could work towards achieving. Accompanied by indicators that inform the collective that progress is being made, and what still needs to be accomplished.

## EDUCATION, TRAINING, AND EMPLOYMENT

Education, Training, and Employment disparities continue to exist disproportionately compared to the non-Aboriginal population. Meaning there is still reconciliation that needs to happen for pedagogical, educational, and employment purposes. How can one define the gap between theories of reconciliation, the practice of reconciliation, and closing the gaps in inequities before working on equitable measurements between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal populations?

The numbers in the Labour Force<sup>iii</sup> tell us this, that there are currently 160,850 Aboriginal people in the labour force with no certificate, diploma or degree . Out of that number there are 119,535 Aboriginal people who are employed at the point of time of the census. There were also 41,310 Aboriginal people from this population who were unemployed.

Aboriginal people with a university certificate, diploma or degree at bachelor level or above, who are in the labour force numbered 87,280. From that number 81,745 were employed and 5,535 were unemployed. For Aboriginal people possessing a master's degree, there were 13,510 in the labour force. Those who were employed numbered 12,860. The unemployed number was at 650. Out of the 752,395 in the Canadian labour force, there are 1,665 with a doctorate degree. Within that statistic, 1,600 were employed and 60 were unemployed.

Data from the 2016 census provides MVAEC with possible goals to consider from the housing and education, training, and employment sector disparity gaps that still need to be closed. Collective effort in closing these gaps would be an expression of the non-profit urban Aboriginal executive community, along with their allies, working together to make sure the reconciliation is a measurable and achievable goal.

Comparing the labour income of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people is visually interesting. When looking at the income for the Aboriginal population, everything can be presented in one table<sup>iv</sup>. When looking at the income for the non-Aboriginal population, one finds a beautiful interactive map

that includes all sectors of employment<sup>y</sup>. Leaving one wanting more diversified opportunities for all Aboriginal people. Especially outside of the non-profit sector.

The median earning income for people with an Aboriginal identity in 2016, was \$26,385. The average employment income for Aboriginal people was \$ 36,748. For non-Aboriginal people, and regardless of sector, the median earning was \$34,013. The difference in median earning income between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people was \$7,628. There are numerous factors that can inform interpretation of the data, but since MVAEC has a mandate to improve the quality of life for the urban Aboriginal population across the social determinants of health, there are complex questions that need answering.

For one, if the Aboriginal population projections are true, and the population continues to grow, is the same gap going to remain for earned income? If the gap remains, how does the difference impact housing affordability and educational attainment. Will these problems be compounded by an ongoing displacement of Aboriginal people from communities with accessible services? Will the urban Aboriginal population continue to find a majority of their employment in the non-profit sector, with ongoing volatile funding structures? If governments and non-profits are serious about holistic models, then intergenerational financial literacy, educational attainment, and income earning and purchasing power need to be seriously looked at for the successive generational booms.

## POLICY DESIGN, ECONOMIC WELL-BEING, AND THE URBAN ABORIGINAL NON-PROFIT SECTOR

As a hub organization MVAEC is in a position to strengthen the definition, performance, and evaluation of the urban Aboriginal non-profit sector. Due to national, provincial, and municipal funding structures, MVAEC has not had the opportunity to provide continuity in this leadership role for the 25 community agency membership since 2013. Without this leadership role, the sector has faced barriers in combating poverty in relation to well-being. Due in large part to the inability to retain staff.

From a policy perspective, MVAEC would like to avoid generalizing the term poverty and the associated stigma. Instead, MVAEC would prefer to see an uptake of the term urban Aboriginal economic well-being. Urban Aboriginal economic well-being could be a future policy position for MVAEC. On the practice side it would be defined through the concepts of need, achievement, and ongoing deprivation. Providing an urban Aboriginal policy and practice that is holistic in philosophy and practice for economic engagement.

Applying need, achievement, and ongoing deprivation as a unit of measurement can be used to address the inequities between all levels of the urban Aboriginal population; from individual, to family, community, employer and employee, and non-profit sector. Continuity in implementation would enhance future evaluation of sector and inter-sector performance as well. Continuity in implementation would also provide future policy and practice practitioners with a stronger evidence base to compare with non-Aboriginal allies and partners.

Anecdotally, the Aboriginal executive implementation of urban Aboriginal economic well-being would balance out the economic strengths and weaknesses of the entire urban Aboriginal population.

MVAEC urban Aboriginal well-being goals, targets, and indicators could build a foundation on the oral histories of both host First Nations who have traditional territories across the lower mainland. As well as visiting First Nations. Oral histories contain locally developed ways of knowing and being in the world.

## WHAT IS ORAL HISTORY THEORY?

It is common understanding among Indigenous people and their allies, that Indigenous communities have historically built their communities upon the foundation of oral history. Ways of knowing and being in the world were passed down from generation to generation through oral methods. Meaning that it informed early childhood and family development, community development, economic development, and governance. The individual was never separable from the collective. Furthermore, one process was not isolated from the others. Early childhood and family development was not isolated from economic development. In fact, in Coast Salish longhouses all processes can unfold simultaneously in a potlatch.

Oral history facilitates process through individual reverence for family histories. “In order to exist in the social world with a comfortable sense of being a good, socially proper, and stable person, an individual needs to have a coherent, acceptable, and constantly revised life story...Life stories express our sense of self: who we are and how we got that way. They are also one very important means by which we communicate this sense of self and negotiate it with others.<sup>vi</sup>” The past, present, and future are wrapped up in oral histories.

When families and communities are raised in oral histories, the similarities in world view contribute to definitions of identity, communication, decision-making, and governance. In one oral history theory there are three characteristics that enhance oral history life stories; continuity of the self through time, relation of the self to others, and reflexivity of the self. These concepts sometimes get lost when Indigenous and non-Indigenous organizations design policy, program, and service delivery together.

Non-Indigenous decision-makers, for the most part, having not been raised in oral history communities, lack the understanding of how oral histories inform personal, tribal and professional decision-making. Nor are there are common standards for non-Indigenous people who want to contribute to reconciliation and community development from a place of cultural empathy.

## CONNECTION BETWEEN INDIGENOUS ORAL HISTORY THEORY AND POLICY?

Legal reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous nations has only been in effect since the amendment of the Indian Act in 1985, and the contribution to social change from the Canada National Truth and Reconciliation Commission, that occurred between 2010 and 2015. There are steps forward and steps back in this progress. Change varies nationally, provincially, and at local levels. Change can also be perceived as volatile by Indigenous people at one or all of these community levels. Usually as a result of non-Indigenous systems assimilating Indigenous oral history philosophies into non-Indigenous philosophies of governance, public administration, and non-profit sector performance at regional and local levels.

The concept of integrating potlatch economy processes into non-Indigenous administrations involves a reversal of criteria for decision-making. Just as oral histories inform the decision-making for Indigenous people who have been raised in oral history driven households, non-Indigenous decision-makers require a paradigm shift of assimilating themselves into Indigenous oral histories.

Leading decision-makers to an intersection where non-Indigenous people live between two worlds: The Indigenous and non-Indigenous intersection of social planning and policy development. Returning to the understanding that, “in order to exist in the social world with a comfortable sense of being a good, socially proper, and stable person, an individual needs to have a coherent, acceptable, and constantly revised life story...Life stories express our sense of self: who we are and how we got that way. They are also one very important means by which we communicate this sense of self and negotiate it with others.” A reversal where a non-Indigenous decision-maker has this sense of self, but is integrating Indigenous oral histories into their world view and decision-making process. In other words, empathy.

How non-Indigenous people practice empathy with the Indigenous non-profit sector would involve knowing how access to oral histories informs the identity of their Indigenous peers. In the words of Coast Salish elder Ellen White, oral histories help answer three life questions; (1) who am I? (2) where do I come from? (3) what is my purpose<sup>vii</sup>. The questions are intended to guide personal,

academic, and professional development. Community engagement and policy development between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people unfolds from this understanding. It should be acknowledged that non-Indigenous allies have varying degrees of knowledge about engagement with Indigenous peers.

Indigenous identity is not limited to individuals identifying themselves by their traditional name, along with tribal and First Nations affiliation. Individual, tribal, and First Nation identifiers are connected to vast networks of personal, tribal and inter-tribal, and First Nation organizing forces.

## CONNECTION BETWEEN INDIGENOUS ORAL HISTORY THEORY AND POLICY PRACTICE

Oral histories can be used multiple different ways to answer these questions. Given the diverse demographics of the urban Indigenous population in Metro Vancouver, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous organizations in the non-profit sector would benefit by always enhancing this participatory problem solving method. Learning would be incremental, thus, the integration into non-Indigenous social planning and policy development would be slow too. The benefit would be being able to use the outcomes to qualitatively measure social impacts at the executive level.

The MVAEC emphasis on qualitative measurement would balance out the current focus on quantitative measurements, and evidence-based practices in the other parts of the non-Indigenous government, private, and non-profit sectors. MVAEC can reflect on how, when, and where in social planning, policy development, program development, and service delivery, ideas come together to resemble similarities; where there are differences; and what is worth and not worth contributing solutions to in the interest of the urban Aboriginal population.

Urban Indigenous organizations need to find a creative way to advocate for the ongoing need of oral history theory. The risk of not advocating for the integration of oral histories into our planning, is the erasure of these histories from memory. A self-fulfilling prophecy that is the outcome of colonialism.

## THE POTLATCH ECONOMY IN METRO VANCOUVER

So what is the potlatch economy? At the heart of the MVAEC potlatch economy concept, is the ability to witness an individual who has the capacity to host a potlatch for their community. Requiring an individual to role model the highest traditional standards of well-being emotionally, mentally, physically, and most importantly, spiritually. The MVAEC potlatch economy is the traditional holistic measurement of spirit, the individual, the family, the tribe, and the nation.

The following is an example of one might define the practice of a potlatch economy in an ideal situation. It crucial that we critically reflect on the criteria for human development that we are encouraging people to engage with. Do we want urban Indigenous people to engage in economic and employment development initiatives that are not maximally informed by Indigenous culture? Or do we want a more nuanced understanding of the traditional criteria people would adhere to that would demonstrate maximal well-being indicators? Indicators defined by oral histories.

The potlatch economy begins with intention. The intention to acknowledge that traditional forms of holistic measurements exist. Followed by the intention to use these measurements to regulate one's own behavior in all interactions. After an individual carefully crafts their intentions, they enter a politics of engagement with their network of elders.

Following consent from elders to do their intended work, an individual and their family enter the coordination and management of many moving parts in their network. Always facilitated by spiritual preparation and adherence to spiritual ethics. Failure to do so resulting in the possibility of no longer being allowed to complete the work, and having rights to certain cultural titles revoked.

What stands out the most in repoliticizing the potlatch economy for urban Indigenous populations across Metro Vancouver is access to natural resources for cultural purposes. To host a potlatch an individual needs to have the ability to feed two-hundred to five-hundred people twice in one day. In addition to the requirement of feeding small groups of twenty to fifty people two to three times prior to the potlatch during smaller preparatory ceremonies or consultations.

Environmental measures would involve having access to pollutant free and wild salmon, cod, herring, fish roe, prawns, Dungeness crabs, shell fish, and ducks from the ocean: Deer or bears from the woods. For the urban Indigenous individual, there are numerous barriers to accessing these resources. Impacting the potential ability to fulfill Potlatching responsibilities. Not to mention the interference with life-span nutritional needs as defined by tradition.

Reconciliation across Metro Vancouver would involve a collective effort to reintroduce this ability in the urban Indigenous population. Since MVAEC works with the urban Indigenous executive community, it would make sense to start to bring this capacity back to organizations. Urban Indigenous service providers are vital sites for Indigenous people to socially organize themselves, and maintain connection through identity and culture.

These traditionally-based indicators, if able to function at maximum capacity, contribute to the individual and group power to socially organize for self-determination. The achievement of traditionally-based indicators is the foundation for the operation of traditional laws.

Access to the emotional, mental, physical, and spiritual and the natural resources necessary to complete a potlatch imply connection with traditional laws. Laws designed to maintain the balance of distribution between human, material world, and spirit world.

Author of *Canada's Indigenous Constitution*<sup>viii</sup>, John Borrows, articulates the traditional sources of Indigenous law. The underpinnings of Indigenous law are entwined with the social, historical, political, biological, economic, and spiritual circumstances of each group<sup>ix</sup>. Common law developed in the local context of each family, tribe, and First Nation. The urban Indigenous population turns this problem on its head. In true potlatch fashion, all of the various streams of culture pool together.

Despite the variance in practice, the source of Indigenous can be defined succinctly as; (1) sacred law, (2) natural law, (3) deliberative law, and (4) positivistic law. Laymen may feel an instinctive tension when contemplating the idea that Indigenous families, tribes, and nations possessed positivistic laws. Positivistic laws are the glue that hold the number of four together. Their laws may be regarded as positivistic because they rely more on the authority and intelligence of those who issue

them than on the notion of creation, nature, or community deliberation<sup>x</sup>. One indicators builds upon another in Indigenous human development, and, the network becomes wider.

There are publicly accessible sources of oral histories. Sources contain the narratives of how these locally developed goals, targets, and indicators for individuals, families, tribes, and nations have come into existence. However, colonialism has left all of us with a psychology of poverty. Where we have learned to dismiss the agency, authority, and validity that are porous in oral histories.

Social planning, policy development, and decision-makers with a vested interest in urban Indigenous populations need processes to enter a preparedness to learn. Through this preparedness to learn decision-makers can set aside personal and social bias to become open other ways of knowing and interacting with the world that have operated for centuries. Even if operation was underground. For instance, when the potlatch system went underground during the Canada wide potlatch ban.

We are accustomed to perpetuating the status quo of non-Indigenous processes. Unsettling our bias and engaging with other ways of knowing takes a tremendous amount of investment of time, money, and people. However, this is what reconciling the psychology of poverty requires. The requirement of nothing less than a collective effort to work together to solve social issues that we sometimes forget require social responses. The identification of counter-productive behaviors that provide short-term solutions to long-term problems. Solutions such as traditional potlatch economies that reflect traditional human development approaches. Locally developed, passionately defended, and resilient in nature.

Until the resources become available to unpack these processes that compliment non-Indigenous processes, short-term solutions will continue to be the status quo investment. Ignoring the long-term solutions embedded in potlatch economies, does not change the fact that social inequities will continue on, where policy changes will remain incremental. Resulting in the exponential increase in the resources required to resolve issues in the future.

## END NOTES

<sup>i</sup> Aboriginal peoples in Canada: Key results from the 2016 Census, <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/daily-quotidien/171025/dq171025a-eng.htm>

<sup>ii</sup> The housing conditions of Aboriginal people in Canada, <http://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2016/as-sa/98-200-x/2016021/98-200-x2016021-eng.cfm>

<sup>iii</sup> Labour Force Status (8), Highest Certificate, Diploma or Degree (15), Aboriginal Identity (9), Age (13A) and Sex (3) for the Population Aged 15 Years and Over in Private Households of Canada, Provinces and Territories, Census Metropolitan Areas and Census Agglomerations, 2016 Census - 25% Sample Data, <http://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2016/dp-pd/dt-td/Rp-eng.cfm?LANG=E&APATH=3&DETAIL=0&DIM=0&FL=A&FREE=0&GC=0&GID=0&GK=0&GRP=1&PID=110693&PRID=10&PTYPE=109445&S=0&SHOWALL=0&SUB=0&Temporal=2017&THEME=124&VID=0&VNAMEE=&VNAMEF>

<sup>iv</sup> Aboriginal Identity (9), Employment Income Statistics (7), Highest Certificate, Diploma or Degree (11), Major Field of Study - Classification of Instructional Programs (CIP) 2016 (14), Work Activity During the Reference Year (3), Age (10) and Sex (3) for the Population Aged 15 Years and Over in Private Households of Canada, Provinces and Territories, 2016 Census - 25% Sample Data, <http://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2016/dp-pd/dt-td/Rp-eng.cfm?LANG=E&APATH=3&DETAIL=0&DIM=0&FL=A&FREE=0&GC=0&GID=0&GK=0&GRP=1&PID=110682&PRID=10&PTYPE=109445&S=0&SHOWALL=0&SUB=0&Temporal=2017&THEME=123&VID=0&VNAMEE=&VNAMEF>

<sup>v</sup> Employed labour force who worked full year, full time and reported employment income in 2015, 2016 Census, <http://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2016/dp-pd/dv-vd/occ-pro/index-eng.cfm>

<sup>vi</sup> Abrams, L. (2016). Oral history theory, second edition. Routledge.

<sup>vii</sup> Coast Salish elder Ellen White shared these oral history questions with students in the First Nations Studies Faculty, in Vancouver Island University, at the Nanaimo campus.

<sup>viii</sup> Borrows, J. (2010). Canada's Indigenous constitution. Toronto, On.: University of Toronto Press.

<sup>ix</sup> P.23-24.

<sup>x</sup> P.47