CCMARD, RECONCILIATION AND ABORIGINAL PEOPLES IN CANADA

Danika B. Littlechild lives in Maskwacis, Alberta. She is the Vice-President of the Canadian Commission for UNESCO and chaired its Sectoral Commission on Culture, Communication and Information from 2007-2011. Danika currently practices law in Ermineskin Cree Nation, working with Indigenous Peoples in a variety of areas including governance, Indigenous legal orders, environment, and international law. Danika also serves as consulting legal counsel for the International Indian Treaty Council (IITC, www.treatycouncil.org), an Indigenous NGO with General Consultative Status (ECOSOC), which represents Indigenous Peoples from North America, Latin America, the Caribbean and the Pacific. Danika served as a member and Deputy Vice Chair of the Board of Directors of the North-South Institute (www.nsi-ins.ca), recognized as a leading global think tank, from 2008-2014.

I was a member of the pan-Canadian working group that, in 2005, established the Declaration to be signed by municipalities joining the Coalition. This group also adapted the Commitments identified at the international level to outline the role of Canadian municipalities in the CCMARD initiative. One of the goals of our work was to ensure the inclusivity of Aboriginal peoples in the foundational documents to be used by municipalities. Being a member of a First Nation myself, situated near two municipalities, I understood some of the challenges and intricacies of historical and contemporary relations between Aboriginal communities and surrounding municipalities.

It is not always easy to understand how Aboriginal peoples "fit into" a conversation about diversity, racism, and discrimination. This is complicated by the fact that much of Aboriginal identity and citizenship is dictated by complex and extensive laws and policies. Yet, there are many instances of heightened conflict, racism, and discrimination in regions where Aboriginal communities are located in close proximity to municipalities. In 2005, I felt strongly that the CCMARD initiative offered a tool and a mechanism to address such situations. Almost ten years later, I continue to have faith in the utility and potential of CCMARD to open the dialogue between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Canadians about racism and discrimination.

We are in an era of reconciliation. In 2008, the Government of Canada issued an apology for the appalling history of residential schools in Canada (which only ended in 1996). We have seen the establishment of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) of Canada, whose mandate comes to an end in 2015. The work of the TRC has led to new conversations between and amongst Canadians about our shared history in Canada, in particular the dark chapter of residential schools. Both of my parents attended residential schools, and I continue to live with that legacy as a child of survivors. We have recently heard from the Supreme Court of Canada that reconciliation has to form the basis of our future relations – between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Canadians. But what does reconciliation mean?

It is not only about addressing the singular issue of residential schools. It must be so much more than that. The content of that wonderful word – reconciliation – must be carefully constructed, with fulsome and active contributions of Aboriginal

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peoples. A significant aspect of reconciliation must happen between communities, at the local level. This is where CCMARD has an important role to play.

CCMARD has the potential to be used as a tool for reconciliation because its framework is so expansive and visionary. There is room within that framework for the voices and perspectives of diverse Aboriginal peoples, those living in municipalities or those from closely situated communities or reserves. CCMARD can provide the space for respectful dialogue and progress towards a kind of reconciliation that we can all agree upon.