DEVELOPING A FIRST NATIONS COMMUNITY WELL-BEING PARTNERSHIP ON-SITE DIALOGUE PROJECT: PRELIMINARY FINDINGS FROM A VALIDATION STUDY OF THE FIRST NATIONS COMMUNITY WELL-BEING INDEX IN KITIGAN ZIBI ANISHINABEG, QUÉBEC[1]

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ABSTRACT / RÉSUMÉ

The First Nations Community Well-being Index (FNCWB), developed by the Strategic Research and Analysis Directorate of Indian and Northern Affairs Canada (INAC), provides community-level measures of socioeconomic well-being based on Canadian census data. Since its publication in 2004, the FNCWB has been recognized as an important analytical tool. However, well-being is also inherently subjective, and community-level perspectives about well-being will not always conform to the parameters of the FNCWB. Thisarticle discusses preliminary findings from a validation study of the FNCWB currently being undertaken in partnership with a number of First Nations across Canada; findings presented here are drawn from focus group discussions held in the Fall of 2008 at Kitigan Zibi Anishinabeg.

L'indice de bien-être des collectivités (IBC) a été mis au point par la Direction de la recherche stratégique et de l'analyse d'Affaires indiennes et du Nord Canada (AINC) afin d'offrir un moyen de mesurer le bien être socioéconomique des collectivités basé sur les données du recensement canadien. Depuis sa publication en 2004, l'IBC a été reconnu comme un important outil d'analyse. Toutefois, le bien-être est également un concept subjectif par définition et le point de vue des collectivités à ce propos n'est pas toujours en accord avec les résultats de l'IBC. Cet article examine les résultats préliminaires d'une étude de validation de l'IBC actuellement en cours en partenariat avec un certain nombre de Premières nations dans l'ensemble du Canada; les résultats présentés ici sont tirés des discussions d'un groupe de consultation tenues à l'automne 2008 à Kitigan Zibi (Anishinabeg).

BACKGROUND

Since 1998, the Strategic Research and Analysis Directorate (SRAD) of Indian and Northern Affairs Canada (INAC) has conducted national population-level and community-level well-being research in First Nations using Census data, including education, housing (crowding level and extent of disrepair), income and labour market participation (O'Sullivan and McHardy 2004).

Analyses of well-being of First Nations based on the FNCWB have been widely published (White, Beavon, and Spence 2007; Guimond and Cooke 2008; Cooke, Guimond, and McWhirter 2008), and the FNCWB methodology has been applied to analyses of Inuit (Senécal and O'Sullivan 2006) and Métis (LaPointe, Senécal, and Guimond 2009) communities as well. At the same time, researchers continue to analyze the FNCWB itself to validate the methodology and to identify ways of improving it.

This paper discusses findings to date from one stream of research undertaken to improve the FNCWB: the FNCWB Partnerships On-Site Dialogue Project. Findings are drawn from the first case study completed for this project – the First Nation of Kitigan Zibi Anishinabeg, in western Québec.

THE FNCWB PARTNERSHIPS ON-SITE DIALOGUE PROJECT

The First Nations Community Well-Being Partnerships On-Site Dialogue Project is modeled on the belief that "participation as [a] permeating theme" is an important starting point in analyzing First Nations' community well-being (White, Beavon, and Spence 2007). First Nations must be partners in analyzing their own well-being and on-site participatory research discussions must take place within First Nations communities.

The objectives of the FNCWB Partnerships On-Site Dialogue project are threefold. First, working in partnership with moderate- and high-scoring First Nations, the FNCWB Partnerships On-Site Dialogue seeks to determine whether relatively high FNCWB scores accurately reflect perceived quality of life in those communities: do community members agree with the rankings, are there concerns with some elements of the analysis or the underlying data; is the FNCWB framework an appropriate tool to measure well-being in a First Nations context. Second, to the extent the FNCWB scores are perceived as accurate, the FNCWB Partnerships On-Site Dialogue hopes to work with community members to identify factors that have affected their quality of life: can they provide examples of programs which contribute to their well-being success; what are some challenges and community-level future goals that will affect their future well-being. Lastly, the FNCWB Partnerships On-Site Dialogue hopes to establish positive relations with First Nations whereby communities would be willing to act as role models to other First Nations through the publication of a case study showcasing their successes and challenges.

SCOPE AND METHODOLOGY

The FNCWB Partnerships On-Site Dialogue Project methodology consists of a series of focus groups and interviews organized in partnership with selected medium- and high-scoring First Nations[2] from all regions of Canada. Focus groups were arranged according to community sector organization: for the Kitigan Zibi case study, a total of seven, two to three hour focus groups were held with various sectors of the community (Elders/seniors, grades 9-12 students, youth aged 17-35, teachers, Directors, Chief and Council) for a total of over 100 participants over a two month period. Prior permission was obtained from Chief Gilbert Whiteduck and council to convene these focus groups.

Each focus group consisted of a facilitated introduction of focus group participants, a discussion on the focus group objectives (including a presentation on the FNCWB, with special discussion of the community's score), approval of the focus group format, and an open discussion on the FNCWB's findings, including inviting participants to share their own thoughts about their successes as a community. Participants were also given a list of questions and a table of potential well-being indicators (see Figures 1 and 2) to help spur discussion.

Everything said during focus groups was written down publicly on flip charts, mostly using direct quotations; in cases where a comment was paraphrased, verification was solicited. It must be noted that the use of tape recorders has been avoided to address privacy concerns of interviewees, to encourage them to speak openly and to ensure their confidence in the research process.

Further to the partnered approach of this research, draft case studies are shared with the First Nation's Chief and Council for validation, editorial changes made at the request of the community and follow-up meetings, including sharing of second and/or third drafts, were held to ensure community acceptance of the final draft.

Two additional points are worth noting with respect to methodology. First is the importance of keeping the focus group discussions and interviews positive in nature: this was extremely important for participants in the Kitigan Zibi case study because of fear a negative focus would cause participants to be critical of one another within the focus groups; focussing on positive factors became key to the agreed upon format for the focus

groups. Second, INAC has sought to make clear to participants that this project is not being undertaken for evaluative purposes. Although this research could feed into policy understanding and development at a later date, it was clarified that it was not the main goal of the research at this time.

KITIGAN ZIBI ANISHINABEG

Kitigan Zibi Anishinabeg is located in western Québec, 130 kilometres north of Ottawa-Gatineau and adjacent to the town of Maniwaki. The community is sparsely populated (1524 on-reserve members for a land base of 18,000 hectares). Community members speak predominately English, some Algonquin and French. With an overall FNCWB index score of 74, it is considered to be at the upper end of the "medium-score" range of 64-75. Sub-index scores range from a high of 89 (housing), to 72 and 71 (education and labour market activity, respectively), to a low of 64 (income).

Focus groups in Kitigan Zibi were conducted in December 2008. Findings presented here have been organized under two themes: on-site observations regarding the validity of the FNCWB framework and of the community's FNCWB sub-index scores; and observations regarding Kitigan Zibi's track record in promoting community well-being.

OBSERVATIONS REGARDING VALIDITY OF THE FNCWB

Kitigan Zibi focus group participants expressed concern that Census data from their community was incomplete and would therefore impact the validity of the FNCWB score. Some noted that they never met with Census enumerators, and/or did not fill out the Census questionnaire because they were at work. Some participants explicitly noted that their low income sub-index score of 64 may be partly due to a high incidence of unreported income caused by incomplete enumeration and other related problems. Incomplete enumeration in some First Nations has been previously noted as an ongoing challenge (Guimond, Kerr, and Beaujot 2004); it will therefore be important to track whether other case studies produced through the FNCWB Partnerships On-Site Dialogue project yield similar findings with respect to community-level concerns regarding Census enumeration or other limitations inherent to Census data.

Focus groups were not surprised to learn that their highest FNCWB sub-index score was for housing; according to one comment, "one only has to take a drive around to see the houses in the community." There was similarly little surprise with the lower scores in income and labour market activity; some participants suggested these scores may be partly attributable to high rates of seasonal employment, as many of the industries in the region – tourism and forestry were cited in particular – employ people for only six months out of the year.

Following the presentation of the FNCWB framework and community scores, some focus group participants expressed interest in understanding how different indicators could be expected to interact. For example, while Kitigan Zibi scored relatively well in education, its score for income was much lower. This runs counter to expectations that education and income should correlate positively (Clement 2009). Some focus group participants expressed interest in conducting future studies on the relationship between post-secondary attainment rates and income levels in their community.

Administrative, institutional development and the development of social capital are two other well-researched fields of well-being indicators (see Chandler 1998; Chattaway 2002; Mignone et al. 2004) that emerged from the focus group as being important to Kitigan Zibi's approach to well-being. The community has its own police force; some participants also noted that the community's stable governance model has enabled Kitigan Zibi to entice skilled community members to return to live and work in the community. Finally, the community has undertaken steps to ensure ongoing analysis of how community programs assist those in need. When one participant of the Director Focus Group stated: "we have a strong management regime and are internally self-reliant, we do not rely on contractors or consultants, we train our own people," the entire focus group unanimously agreed. They also stated, "we have a strong work ethic dedicated to community advancement." They also acknowledged however, that "what comes with stability are that public community expectations are high by our community members which can be stressful at times."

WORKING ON WELL-BEING

Overall, Kitigan Zibi Anishinabeg has worked very hard to achieve some measure of well-being success – an effort spanning over thirty years, according to some community members. Focus group participants were eager to discuss well-being and to identify factors that have contributed to their successes in terms of well-being and community development.

The community has put a great deal of effort into addressing health by ensuring availability of a wide range of services – doctors, nurses, dieticians, and psychologists, plus programs such as ongoing diabetes workshops, Seniors' (Endong) luncheons, nursing care programs, home care and visits, social events for seniors, youth

recreation programs (on and off reserve), and healthy baby programs at the health care center.

In terms of housing, "we have the Certificates of Possession system in the community which allows people to internally own the land… and as a result, people take pride in their homes. We have private lots under the C.P. system and no slum development."[3] Participants also cited the community's creative Revolving Loan fund system, developed over twenty years ago, which allows members to borrow from the First Nation order to invest in expanding or improving Kitigan Zibi. They also invested in social housing units in 2000, using monies earned from the community-owned forestry company Mitigog Incorporated. Participants noted that, on average, there are about three persons per unit and that there is no overcrowding generally. Repairs are dealt with every year.

In terms of investing in education, a number of initiatives have been implemented in Kitigan Zibi that target both early childhood development, K-11 and post-secondary success; such as the Aboriginal Head Start Program, which targets pre-K children. There are also a number of programs in place that are not funded by the federal government, including the hot lunch program; snack programs; the cereal program; and the cultural immersion program – "Mokasige" is a half day of Algonquin immersion language teaching every afternoon for children enrolled in the program. Promoting Anishinabeg heritage is a priority, with activities such as hand drumming, summer camps, picnics, powwows, family days, trips to traditional lands, cultural days, dancing and canoe making. There are also a number of on-site programs established through partnerships with community colleges and universities in the region. These include programs in social work, teaching, high school upgrading and various trades including heavy equipment, construction and trucking.

Focus group participants felt strongly that these programs provide children in the community with a healthy outlook on life. Overall, participants expressed satisfaction with the community's approach to education, noting that teachers and staff are caring, parents recognize the value of education, and "family and culture is put first."

In terms of economic development, Kitigan Zibi has negotiated partnerships with local regional authorities and the Québec government, as well as forestry companies such as Abitibi-Bowater, to develop training programs in brush cutting and sylvicuture in order to stimulate employment within the community. They have a C.A.F. (Contrat d'aménagement forestière) agreement with the Québec government to be paid for cutting timber on traditional lands.[4] Local First Nation contractors are also paid for cutting on their lands via the administration office for local timber which is sold to local forestry companies. Kitigan Zibi also have an agreement with a regional fire fighting service (SOPFEU) to hire and train firefighters every year. In addition to the aforementioned Mitigog Incorporated, Kitigan Zibi owns and operates a maple sugar production facility. They also have a Home Hardware (Pasahigun), a printing business (Anishinabeg Printing) and a number of service-oriented operations.

Leadership and good governance is viewed as important. One focus group participant stated: "there is a delegation of responsibilities via directors that is not seen in other communities. They have contracts, job descriptions, financial transparency and ongoing policy development… Kitigan Zibi is a financially transparent community." Another noted that "policies are being put into place to make it easier for directors to make decisions which will equal less political lobbying or interference in decision-making which results in fairness."

The First Nation's administrative sector employs approximately 150 employees full-time and an additional 50-60 employees seasonally in general labour positions such as tree maintenance, brush cutting, cutting grass, and wood cutting, which take place in the summer time.

When participants were asked how they felt about chronic seasonal employment in their community, they replied that it was not necessarily "a bad thing" because it does allow them to recapture their culture of hunting and fishing while providing for their families, which they felt was important. In fact, they felt that the survival of their culture was very important to their future identity and well-being as Algonquin peoples.

CONCLUSION

First, it will be interesting to hear perspectives of residents of other First Nations regarding the FNCWB framework, the Census, and other measures of well-being. Kitigan Zibi is a strong believer in promoting traditional culture and language through education and cultural programs, and focus group participants stressed the importance of culture and language in assessing community well-being. The lack of a place for culture in the FNCWB has been debated extensively (Chandler and Lalonde 2000; O'Sullivan 2003; Ten Fingers 2005; Salée 2006; Cooke 2007; Cornell and Jorgenson 2009); the debate will likely continue during the course of this project.

Second, it is important to note that for a First Nation with a moderate FNCWB score of 74, the evidence shows that Kitigan Zibi has invested a great deal of effort in improving the quality of community life over a long period of time, seeking to provide members with every service possible to ameliorate their well-being. Focus

group participants attribute their successes to dedicated and stable leadership; a commitment to self-reliance; a strong labour force, and strong governance practices and policies. They view this track record with pride, even as they acknowledge ongoing challenges. The level of effort required to achieve a high standard of community well-being is not always appreciated in either research literature or policy discourse; based on this case study, it may become necessary to explore what constitutes a "role model" community in greater depth as this project proceeds.

Finally, it is evident from this study that while the FNCWB provides a useful preliminary indicator of well-being, it remains important, if one wishes to acquire a full understanding of well-being in First Nations, to actually visit First Nation communities and talk to community members. The Kitigan Zibi case study reveals just how many factors have an effect on community well-being. Through the FNCWB Partnerships On-Site Dialogue Project, First Nations will have the opportunity to provide their own perspectives on well-being, and will be able to share important lessons about improving well-being with other First Nations.

NOTES

[1] The Kitigan Zibi Anishinabeg maintain a website at http://www.kza.qc.ca/. This case study and further case studies will soon be available on the INAC website, http://www.ainc-inac.gc.ca/.

[2] Of the 541 First Nations communities analyzed in 2001, 356 received a medium-level score of between 60 and 75 (out of 100); 89 received an above-average score between 75 and 100, and 96 communities received a score of below 60, which classified them as having socio-economic difficulties (McHardy and O'Sullivan 2004).

[3] Certificates of Possession are the closest form of inter-member ownership of land under section 20(2) of the Indian Act (Imai 2007). An individual member can own the land individually and can sell it to members but this land cannot be mortgaged, seized or used as collateral by an outside agency.

[4] Kitigan Zibi maintains that it is unceded territory and has submitted a comprehensive land claim in 1988 which has yet to be negotiated.

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