
April 23, 2004

A New Social Model for Canada: Revamping Policies for Aboriginal Peoples

Ottawa – Aboriginal peoples face a predicament. Dated assumptions and ingrained relationships hinder appropriate responses to changing social realities.

Aboriginal peoples, like other Canadians, have experienced changes in labour markets, widening income inequality, new education demands and changing demography. And, like elsewhere, policies have failed to keep up.

Redesigning social policies for Aboriginal peoples is the focus of two new reports in CPRN's Social Architecture Papers. *Urgent Need, Serious Opportunity: Towards a New Social Model for Canada's Aboriginal Peoples*, by Frances Abele, documents the changes in Canada's Aboriginal communities in recent decades and their implications for a new social model. *Lessons from Abroad: Towards a New Social Model for Canada's Aboriginal Peoples*, by Martin Papillon and Gina Cosentino, reviews experience in the United States, New Zealand and Australia for lessons relevant to developing a new social model for Aboriginal peoples in Canada.

"The prospect of a new social architecture for Canada provides a chance to catch up to dramatic legal, political and demographic developments among Aboriginal peoples over the past three decades," says Abele. "Some of these changes underline a critical need for action. Others provide new and more favourable conditions for policy development."

Some facts:

- Canada's Aboriginal population is growing almost three times as fast as that of the rest of the country, is much younger than the general population, and is increasingly urbanized.
- The poverty rate among Aboriginal peoples in the country's 12 largest cities is between twice and four times the rate for non-Aboriginal people. More than 50 per cent of Aboriginal children live in poverty. Suicide rates are five to seven times the rate for other Canadians.
- Aboriginal peoples live in poorer, more crowded housing and have less access to adequate water and sewer infrastructure than non-Aboriginal Canadians.
- While Aboriginal workers earn less than the Canadian average wage, the gap is narrowing. Similarly, levels of education, while still below average, are rising.

“Addressing the persistent poverty among Aboriginal peoples and its effects is the immediate challenge,” says Abele. “But there is cause for optimism – new developments that can contribute to the effectiveness of future initiatives.”

As examples, Abele describes attempts to overcome the legalistic barriers between those who claim Aboriginal identity, the growing role played by Aboriginal organizations in the development and delivery of services, and the experimentation, greater flexibility and diversity this new sensitivity to local conditions permits.

“What we see is an enormous amount of ‘policy learning’ taking place at all levels of government,” says Abele. “This bodes well for the future.”

Papillon and Cosentino find Aboriginal peoples in the United States, New Zealand, Australia and Canada face common socio-economic challenges. They also share a history of paternalistic and disempowering policies that fostered a high level of dependency on the state, and a high level of mistrust.

Today, these countries are moving away from such policies towards integrating Aboriginal programming into mainstream departments and decentralized program management. These attempts have had what the authors call a “paradoxical” effect.

“Such policies appear to contradict Aboriginal peoples’ demand for distinct status,” says Papillon, “But the significant administrative decentralization that accompanies them has led to an unexpected outcome – growing autonomy at the community level.”

This strengthening of community institutions, identified by both Abele and Papillon and Cosentino, gives the authors reason for optimism.

“There might, in fact, be a timely intersection between restructuring post-war social models, with policies designed to enable citizens, rather than protect them from market failures, and transformation in Aboriginal-state relations,” Papillon suggests.

The authors of both papers warn, however, that decentralization will contribute to self-reliance only if it is accompanied by the resources to do the job, and a commitment by senior governments to capacity building within Aboriginal communities.

CPRN is a national not-for-profit research institute whose mission is to create knowledge and lead public debate on social and economic issues important to the well-being of Canadians, in order to help build a more just, prosperous and caring society.

For more information on the publication, please contact:

Frances Abele, Tel: (613) 520-2600 ext. 2553
 Martin Papillon, Tel: (416) 880-0052

Peter Puxley, Director, Public Affairs, Tel: (613) 567-7500 ext. 2019 – E-mail: ppuxley@cprn.org

To download a free copy of the report visit our home page: <http://www.cprn.org>
A weekly e-mail service, *e-network*, provides short updates on research projects or corporate activities.
Visit www.e-network.ca to subscribe.