

TELLING A STORY OF CHANGE THE DENE WAY; INDICATORS FOR MONITORING IN DIAMOND IMPACTED COMMUNITIES

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"We are teaching one another. We need to support one another."
Elder Judy Charlo

"I am glad to be here, and to be part of the solution instead of part of the problem. What I liked about the meeting is that there are so many different ways to look at the problems in the community, but also so many solutions."
Community Social Worker, Nancy Peele

PURPOSE

The Yellowknives Dene First Nation is stepping up to the plate to measure change in the Dene way. This article presents selected perspectives from a community meeting of 25 leaders, organizers, and staff of the Yellowknives Dene First Nation that was held to discuss what indicators should be used to develop a baseline picture of social change and how to collect this information. The Yellowknives are running a pilot project, one that will test methods and community-based indicators, in advance of all the other diamond mine impacted communities in the Northwest Territories. The pilot project is being done by a Committee (the authors of this report) as well as a social scientist (also an author). The social scientist researcher serves as a technical advisor, helping to design the survey and interview instruments, and to collect, manage, and interpret the data. The Yellowknives Dene First Nation members hold ownership of the information, guide project design, implementation, data analysis, and reporting. This paper reviews how we designed the research project.

BACKGROUND

The Yellowknives Dene First Nation is sure that their communities have changed since the opening of Canada's first two diamond mines in the North. They live inside and just on the outskirts of the Territorial capital of Yellowknife, and more than 65 of their 450 members work at the two diamond mines that operate in the region. They know full well that the mines have affected them, but the challenge lies in creating appropriate indicators of impact.

Our forefathers were thinking about us when they were negotiating treaty, they were thinking about us when they said, as long as the rivers flow. Now we have to think about our children. Will they be able to live here when the population is 50000 in YK? Will they be able to hunt?
Treaty Negotiator Fred Sangris

The Yellowknives Dene First Nation include roughly 1,000 people, living in N'Dilo, a stand-alone community adjacent to Yellowknife and Dettah, which is only seven kilometres from the capital. Also, about a third of the

membership live in Yellowknife itself. The community members speak predominantly the Weledeh dialect of Dogrib and Chipewyan. Families continue to live from the land, as indicated by the percentage of people reporting hunting, fishing, and trapping activities — 43% in Dettah — along with those who report eating country food — 67.2% in Dettah (Bureau of Statistics, 2003). The Yellowknives Dene signed Treaty 8 in 1900, and leaders continue to negotiate for Treaty Entitlement with the federal government. They are also known as the Akaitcho, named for the fearsome warrior of the group who traded with Samuel Hearne.

In 1997, when the first diamond mine opened, the Yellowknives Dene signed an Impact and Benefits Agreement with BHP Billiton and a Participation Agreement in 2001 with Diavik Diamond Mines. Both Agreements include commitments for employment, training and business opportunities, as well as scholarship funds. Socio-Economic Agreements were also signed with the Territorial government and mines, assigning responsibilities for monitoring socio-economic change. The communities are responsible to report on and monitor change in their own communities. Prior to 2005, diamond mine impacted communities met three times to develop agreed upon indicators.

Near the fiscal year end of 2004, the Yellowknives Dene worried that yet another year would slip by without research. They rapidly assembled a budget and followed the necessary protocol of asking for Chief and Council support to pilot a research project. With the budget approved, the research team planned a community workshop — the subject of this paper — to define the scope of the project and the nature of the indicators to monitor change.

One of the Chiefs of the Yellowknives Dene felt strongly that use of indicators to monitor change is not enough; we must also do something about those changes. According to Chief Beaulieu:

[W]e have done so many surveys, housing, education, health, and all that information that is good. It is not good enough just having that list, we need to make an action list and make things better — it is simple.... We need to develop that toolkit, but if it doesn't go beyond that and create action, then it is not right. It has got to create action. It has to do something. That is what information database is about. Once you create it, then you just add to it.

UNIQUE YELLOWKNIVES DENE INDICATORS

Indicators are expressions about the state of some aspect of a system. If a reasonable baseline state can be established and if this state is measured constantly over time, it can provide people with a sense of whether a trend (for better or for worse) is emerging. An indicator tells us a little bit about a system, and hints at what might be going on with it. Because it is only a piece of information, without the context and relationship to the rest of the system, it can be open to misinterpretation. When a child is sick, they often have a fever. The presence of the fever suggests that the child may have an illness, but of course it doesn't tell us which kind. It may be that the child is teething, has a cold, or the flu.

During the course of the two-day meeting, indicators of socioeconomic change were identified, such as housing, cost of living increases, drug and alcohol abuse, and family violence. These are some of the indicators most commonly used by the government. But people also spoke of their own unique history and geography. For example, no

other Dene community faces quite the same pressure on wildlife resources that the Yellowknives Dene First Nation faces. With more than 20,000 people living in Yellowknife, the Dene now compete for caribou, fish, and other wildlife. The network of winter roads that have opened up with development has increased access to everyone, and people see these Yellowknife citizens out on the land hunting, sometimes for sport and sometimes for food. With many of the Yellowknives members working at the mines, people are no longer training for and becoming language interpreters, so there is fear that language skill may be lost. These are just a few of the Dene specific impacts that people are concerned about as they increasingly become involved in the wage economy.

It rapidly became clear that not all aspects that were described could be transformed easily into indicators. For example, people talked about how childcare responsibilities are being assumed by people other than the parents, as parents work at mines. Grandparents are stepping in more and more to help. When parents are back from mines, people are noticing they are not spending their time with family, but instead using their new found wealth

Yellowknives Dene Indicators

- New access roads in the region.
- Number of language and culture positions in the Band.
- Number of trained interpreters in the communities.

in unhealthy ways. This is having an effect on their ability to maintain their families and to spend time on the land. Elders suggest this will affect the skills and knowledge of the next generation, making it so they have few survival and land-based skills. Indicators simply cannot capture the complexity of this kind of change, which is why the Yellowknives created a research project that can capture indicators as well as stories about change.

SCOPE OF THE RESEARCH

The two diamond mines came on stream over a period of five years, and another mine by De Beers will open in the area in 2007. Under the Socio-Economic Agreement with BHP, the Territorial government agreed to monitor the health and wellness of impacted communities using 14 indicators. Under the Socio-Economic Monitoring Agreement with Diavik, the Territorial government agreed to report on 21 indicators of wellness using public data. Since the mines are only 25 km apart, Yellowknives members work at Ekati and Diavik, and therefore the communities are collecting data about both mines.

The communities aimed to develop their baseline studies when the mines first opened, Fred Sangris said,

One question to gauge impact of the mines is: what was the situation before the mines opened up? Where do we start gauging it from? Last year? Or before they started? It is not just Diavik, but also BHP, and Snap Lake.

And Chief Beaulieu added: *"If you do a survey, we need a baseline."*

Unfortunately, the communities will have to start with what they have now, data from 2005, as funds were not available for research until this time.

THE RESEARCH QUESTION

Discussion of research questions tends to produce questions of great community significance, but these do not always translate easily into research questions that can be tackled by the existing project. Among the thoughts offered at the two-day meeting were the following:

What can we do to live better as elders? We do our best to manage our income, but what can we do to manage it better? Is it drugs, alcohol or gambling, or bingo that is the worst thing? For me, I see it as alcohol, because if you have alcohol or drugs, you can commit suicide, have an accident or drown. (Elder Isadore Tsetta)

- Many good ideas for potential survey questions were also raised, particularly regarding the perspectives of miners. Fred Sangris suggested,

One of the questions could be, even though you work in the mine, would you be willing to go out on the land? They spend all their money right away. And then half goes to rent. As a band, we could be having out on the land outpost camps."

It took two days to narrow in on the question, and even though many of these ideas were expressed for the survey itself, people settled on one research question:

What social and cultural changes have the Yellowknives Dene experienced since the two diamond mines opened?

SAMPLING FOR THE RESEARCH

People discussed the project focus in depth. They started by exposing key weakness of previous studies — because the Yellowknives Dene live in and around Yellowknife, their data is always combined with the population of Yellowknife. As a result, the Yellowknives Dene never have information about what is happening in their communities. When surveys are done, they are completed with the populations of N'Dilo and Dettah. Anyone who lives in downtown Yellowknife is never talked to, so their data is lost. People concluded that if a survey were to be done, it should sample for all three populations.

The possibilities for the study focus began to emerge, and with each suggestion came the intuitions for what might be found. One possible focus is the worker, according to Chief Peter Liske:

You have to focus on the workers of Diavik. The workers here today haven't ever experienced this. How many people actual-

ly experienced rotation work? It is hard, working on rotation. You have to interview the workers and the family. A lot of the workers, if you are single, you have no problem. If you are married, the same problem. There is jealousy. It is reality. It is not a Native thing. I would go there and interview the workers. What is his priority when he comes back? Is it paying for the truck? Going drinking? Partying? Buying luxuries? Or paying for the family?

Another possible focus is the impacts of the mines on the youth:

I can say what I think has affected them, since my husband works at the mine, but I don't know what is happening to them. I don't know how it is affecting them. What are the youth saying? We need their input? We need to include those youth, it is affecting whatever we are doing. Whatever we are doing, it will affect them. We have to focus on them to see what they have to say.
(Sarah Plotner, Yellowknives Dene administrator)

Spouses of workers were identified as important people to talk to, as well as health and social services staff, teachers and principals, youth and elders. Just how to select the population was raised in this dialogue:

You could just ask the miners to identify their wives.
(Chief Peter Liske)

I would recommend against that, because a miner doesn't necessarily represent his wife, or if they are separated, it can be difficult. I bet there are other ways to get to families. Perhaps the radio, flyers, and newsletters. We also have to remind people that it is anonymous.
(Ginger Gibson, researcher)

Will we do random selection of all miners? Or will we do only one mine?
(Linda McDevitt, Yellowknives Dene researcher)

I would say we do all workers, and then follow up surveys with interview with the people who want to talk. I bet only 20 or so

would want to talk in the end.
(Ginger Gibson)

Extended family might be the only ones who want to talk; there are two families that have both the mother and the father in the mines. But I bet they won't want to talk about issues. But the rest of the family might.
(Nancy Peele)

Over the course of the two days, ideas were raised, considered, and finally we settled on an approach.

METHODS

Almost everyone referred to the research using the term “survey,” suggesting that people assumed this was the approach of choice. However, it turned out that people use the term “survey” to refer to all research that might be done. When it came down to discussing what methods to use, people frowned on the survey approach, as they felt that people have been “surveyed to death” and two surveys were being done at the same time as this research was designed. In short, people were tired of answering their door and answering questions that they had no part in designing.

They suggested interviews and focus groups would be an ideal way to learn about the impacts of the mines on the communities. While these methods are being adopted, a survey approach was not thrown out for two reasons. First, there are not a lot of miners, so surveying all of them is feasible and would provide strong data. Second, a full community survey would provide data from non-mining families to compare with the mining families. This possibility would allow the research to compare the impacts on mining and non-mining families, testing for discrepancies or false conclusions. In addition, it would allow the research to test whether there are impacts of mining outside of the unit of the mining family.

In addition to discussing how the project should be done, community members discussed issues of confidentiality, language of administration and methods for ideal contact with respondents in the research. Fred Sangris said:

We have to be careful also, because some people will think we will identify who is right or wrong. We have to steer clear of it. In doing that survey, no matter who you survey, it is family,

workers and community. We are all affected. The whole community is affected. That's where they get the influences from. We shouldn't over-indulge in some things that are confidential to the community.

People talked about how to ask questions in an appropriate way, as seen in this comment by community member, Muriel Betsina:

If I had a survey coming to my house, and they asked a kindly question, like, "If you have problems with alcohol or drugs, would you like to have help?" But if they said, "Are you an alcoholic?" I would say, "No, I am not." Or if they asked if I played cards, I would say, "No." You have to use certain words if you want to do survey with addictions people. It is hard for me to say, I would sure like to sit down with a survey to make good questions, because I really want my children to get help.

RESULTS OF COMMUNITY CONSULTATION

The research approach, following consultation in this two day meeting, changed dramatically:

1. New indicators were identified through our consultation, such as the pressure on wildlife from the non-Aboriginal population. Also pressures to not speak Dogrib at the mines suggested the need to monitor employee comfort levels at the mines. People's satisfaction with the use of the funds for the communities from the mines was also identified as an important topic.
2. We identified four key groups to talk to in focus groups, including Elders, youth, health and social service staff, teachers and principals.
3. We decided to talk to all miners and their families separately. Miners are to be surveyed and interviewed at the mines, as they will likely have more time, be easier to access, and feel less pressure to conform to their family's needs. Spouses and extended family will be surveyed at home and will be contacted through flyers and radio announcements, as well as direct calls.
4. Although people in the community meetings leaned away from surveys, because so many have happened, we still wanted to keep this as

an option in our toolkit. What we decided to do was to map all the domains that people were interested to study, and then categorize them. Once we were able to reduce and sort the indicators, we felt the ideal methods would be more apparent. The questions we used to sort the indicators were:

- What are the goals of the Yellowknives Dene? Which of the indicators tell us about these goals? For example, one major goal turned out to be equity or equal treatment of the Yellowknives Dene at the mines, and many categories of information spoke to that theme.
- What are the means to the end? Which of the indicators or items tell us about the means to the ends? Many of the indicators turned out to be paths towards the ultimate goals, such as equity. For example, the number of miners hired and their job positions spoke to the goal of equity.

We decided to conduct a community survey; however, just as we were designing the instrument for this work, the government surprised us.

UNANTICIPATED CHANGES TO THIS COMMUNITY-BASED RESEARCH

Just as this project was getting off the ground, the Bureau of Statistics began to implement a government-sponsored study in the communities impacted by the mines. Even though the government negotiates with all of the diamond mine impacted communities at multiple tables, they neglected to inform anyone that they were doing this work. They did not ask permission of the communities to do this research. Furthermore, they did not ask the communities to recommend any question categories or domains for their survey. They duplicated work they knew the communities were beginning, and effectively closed the door to any future survey work in 2005. The survey contained questions that were inappropriate, biased by a Eurocentric value system and did not capture data of interest to the impacted communities.

The government research was only discovered after survey researchers were already conducting work in the communities. While this could be seen as planned sabotage of the community efforts to do research, it tends to look more like government ineptitude and lack of dialogue between departments. Regardless of the reasons for why this happened, the government research effectively sabotaged community-based efforts to conduct their own research.

It has made people feel as though the government does not have faith in the communities, as they provide funds for research at one moment, and then do the same research because they just can't trust the communities to do a good job.

One Elder, Judy Charlo, asked in the meeting who the research the Yellowknives Dene proposed is for. She said,

there are things though that you can have interpreted for you, but there is no way to know if it is getting across. Words can mean so many different things. Who is this research for? The white people? Or is it for the Native people?

The members of this research team responded that the research is for the Yellowknives Dene. Government research, on the other hand, seems to be done for the white people. The challenge now is to recover from this blow and move on.

REFERENCES

Northwest Territories Bureau of Statistics
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