

The Social and Cultural Impacts of Reducing the Reliance on Diesel in Canada's Northern Indigenous Communities

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Abstract

As the Canadian government seeks to reconcile its relationship with the Indigenous Peoples of Canada, energy poverty in northern Indigenous communities must be addressed and resolved by the development of clean energy projects. Though the Canadian government has declared its intention to work alongside and assist these communities with the shift toward more sustainable methods for power, this paper highlights the necessity of following through on these initiatives. Relying on a qualitative secondary research approach, this study brings together various aspects into a holistic perspective to make a case for the imbrication of social and cultural factors as well as consequences to drive the argument of the need to reduce the reliance on diesel in northern Indigenous communities.

According to The Conference Board of Canada's report titled "Power Shift: Electricity for Canada's Remote Communities" there are approximately 300 remote communities in northern Canada that are not connected to the North American electrical network (Knowles i), the grid which provides a majority of Canadians a luxury that is often taken for granted. According to *The Agenda's* program titled "Indigenous Power Struggle", "of those 300, 175 are Indigenous communities" (Indigenous Power Struggle¹). These communities are largely dependent on diesel for their power. Diesel is an energy source that is highly unreliable and expensive due to high transportation costs exacerbated by the remoteness of these communities. Furthermore, diesel is destructive to the environment as it is responsible for emitting large amounts of carbon dioxide (CO₂), among other pollutants, into the atmosphere.

According to a video released by the Department of Natural Resources Canada titled *Incorporating Renewable Energy in Remote Communities*, "Per-capita energy use of fossil fuel in

¹ Further citations from this source will be abbreviated as IPS

Canada's northern remote communities is nearly twice the national average due to cold winters and the use of diesel-powered generators for electricity" (Incorporating Renewable Energy²). Thus, as per its agreement with the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change to reduce greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions, the Canadian government must aim to meet its requirements by reducing the dependence on diesel fuel in these rural and remote communities. In attempting to do so, sustainable options must be considered and implemented through the support of the Canadian federal government, as these communities are often small and impoverished, lacking the capital needed to complete the transition to cleaner energy.

Hoping to meet the requirement of reducing GHG emissions, in 2016, the First Ministers of Canada "adopt[ed] the Vancouver Declaration of Clean Growth and Climate Change," which aims to "take ambitious action [...] to reduce GHG emissions by 30 percent below 2005 levels by 2030" (Environment and Climate Change Canada³). Arising from this declaration less than a year later, in December 2016, the Canadian government implemented the Pan-Canadian Framework on Clean Growth and Climate Change, which was

[...] designed to achieve the behavioural and structural changes needed to transition to a low-carbon economy, [...] developed collaboratively by Canada's federal, provincial and territorial governments, with input from Indigenous Peoples as well as from businesses, non-governmental organizations, and Canadians across the country (ECCC).

As a result, "\$220 million over six years [will be dedicated] to support clean energy infrastructure projects that reduce reliance on diesel in off-grid, rural and remote communities," while "\$53.5 million is committed over 10 years for the deployment of renewable energy projects in northern

² Further citations from this source will be abbreviated as IRE.

³ Further citations from this source will be abbreviated as ECCC.

communities to reduce their reliance on diesel [...] through the use of local renewable energy sources and energy efficiency” (ECCC and Natural Resources Canada).

The goal of the present study is not to reiterate what alternatives exist to diesel in remote communities; it has been proven that solar, wind, hydro and/or biomass technology is available to reduce the reliance on diesel for power by storing the energy emitted from these sustainable sources into “smart” microgrids (IRE). The current microgrids, which are the local electrical grids these communities rely on for power, are usually powered by diesel generators; therefore, “integrating solar and wind energy generators” (IRE) will reduce the communities’ reliance on diesel.

That said, the objective of this study is to discuss the consequences that will arise, both socially and culturally, from reducing northern Indigenous communities’ reliance on diesel. In addition to this, a small portion of the treatise will be concerned with how this long-term project has the potential to alter Canadian culture, notably in correcting the Western anthropocentric way of regarding the environment. The arguments offered in this study will only serve to strengthen the significant necessity of providing these Indigenous communities with sustainable alternatives to diesel, especially in a time when the Canadian government is seeking to reconcile its relationship with the Indigenous peoples of Canada.

Part of this study is grounded in structural theories of poverty. Structural theory can be used to explain the cycle of poverty by exposing the large-scale structural conditions, such as “labor market opportunities and/or demographic vulnerabilities” (Brady 146), that make individuals more susceptible to poverty. This study also operates within the context of postcolonial theory as the social problems presented in the study result from colonialism and are reinforced by social structures. For another part, this study can be understood within the framework of ecocriticism. Ecocriticism, as defined by Derek Gladwin, “is a broad way for

literary and cultural scholars to investigate the global ecological crisis through the intersection of literature, culture, and the physical environment” (Gladwin). It will be important to keep this literary and cultural theory in mind as we proceed to discuss the cultural consequences of moving away from diesel for power in northern communities, as it provides insight on how the Canadian government, and, by extension, Canadian culture, may come to address the ecological crisis that is plaguing our time.

My principal methodological approach for studying the social and cultural impact of reducing the North’s reliance on diesel is through qualitative secondary research. I will be studying, synthesizing and analyzing the positions of various individuals from TV programs, government incentive programs and literature, and books, essays, and news articles treating the subject at hand. The main body of work I will be consulting throughout this study is a program in the series *The Agenda with Steve Paikin* titled “Indigenous Power Struggle,” which aired in 2016. In this TVO program, Paikin is joined by five individuals: Isadore Day, the former Ontario Regional Chief for the Chiefs of Ontario; Judith Sayers, former elected Chief of the Huducasth First Nations in British Columbia and professor at the University of Victoria in the Faculty of Law; Cynthia Wesley-Esquimaux, former Vice Provost for Aboriginal Initiatives at Lakehead University; Christopher Henderson, President of Lumos Energy and a Clean Energy Advisor to numerous Aboriginal communities in Canada; and Mitchell Diabo, former Secretary-Treasurer at the Kasabonika Lake Community Development Corporation. I will also be consulting Chris Henderson’s book, *Aboriginal Power: Clean Energy & the Future of Canada’s First Peoples*, published in 2013, along with Indigenous writer N. Scott Momaday’s 1976 essay titled “A First American Views His Land”. Finally, I will be assessing news articles as well as videos and information provided by the Canadian government. The first half of the present document aims to discuss the social results of reducing northern Indigenous communities’ reliance on diesel, while

the remainder of the paper will examine the cultural impact on Indigenous culture, which has the potential to extend into Canadian culture.

The social conditions in Indigenous communities are anything but favourable. As stated in the article “Social Conditions of Indigenous Peoples in Canada,” “[m]uch of the housing in Indigenous communities is inadequate and in need of repair” and “[...] on-reserve rates of overcrowding is significantly higher compared to non-Indigenous homes and those living off-reserve”. (Sawchuk). Concerning water services, “13.5 per cent [of on-reserve homes receive water] by truck service, 13 per cent by individual wells and 1.5 per cent [...] [do] not have water service” and “[...] two-thirds of First Nations people in Canada live[] under at least one water advisory” (Sawchuk). In regard to the health of Indigenous people, it is said “that the leading causes of death [...] were external causes (accidental poisoning, vehicle accident, and intentional self-harm), disease of the circulatory system [...] and neoplasms [...]” (Sawchuk). These are the conditions encountered by Indigenous communities all over Canada, even more so in northern communities. As *The Agenda*’s Steve Paikin reiterates in regards to an earlier statement made by former Chief Isadore Day, “[Indigenous] people are living in substandard living conditions. We need to bring our communities into the 21st century” (IPS).

In the same program, Day discusses a particular tragedy that occurred within the Pikangikum First Nations community, located remotely in northwestern Ontario. This Indigenous community faces dire conditions due to impoverished energy. In March of 2016, a fire broke out in a residential home, taking the lives of nine people, three of which were young children. The report on the Pikangikum fire highlights the poor living conditions in First Nation communities, stating “House fires strike with deadly frequency on First Nations reserves – a function of shoddy construction, overcrowding and the lack of running water” (Galloway and Gignac). This quote serves to sum up and echo the former discussion concerning the subpar conditions Indigenous

people are forced to live in. Furthermore, Day states that “[...] one of the central issues and causes [of the fire] is the fact they’re not on the grid” (IPS). Rarely do we recognize the association between plumbing and electricity, such that these two aspects are dependent on each other in remote communities. Therefore, the lack of dependable electricity contributes to the fact that these communities do not have reliable water services.

This link between water and electricity highlights the first consequence generated from reducing the North’s reliance on diesel. As these Indigenous communities have impoverished energy, they are likely to live in impoverished conditions; therefore, having access to reliable and sustainable energy and distribution increases the likelihood that people will live better. Meeting the basic human necessity most Canadians already have - water accessibility – will lead to the immediate and positive social consequence of improved living conditions. As identified by Cynthia Wesley-Esquimaux, the diesel generators that power the Pikangikum community “were too old to be able to accommodate [...]” running water inside people’s homes (IPS). This is not only applicable to the Pikangikum community. As “[m]any diesel generators are aging” (IRE), they are too old to support access to water within residences. Therefore, reducing the reliance on diesel and replacing it with sustainable resources and distribution implies that these communities could access adequate water services.

As Christopher Henderson points out during the discussion, health complications also arise from continued reliance on diesel. For instance, respiratory problems can develop due to poor air quality (IPS). Over the last few decades, numerous studies have been conducted to report the effects of air pollution on lung function. These studies have shown that diesel emissions have adverse health implications, such that they have a role to play in the development of respiratory illnesses. Further confirming this notion is the World Health Organization’s (WHO) Housing and Health Guidelines, which state that indoor air pollution emerging from “Poor quality heating and

cooking devices [...] [such as] open fires or simple stoves fuelled by kerosene, biomass [...] and coal” contribute to the declination of respiratory health (WHO 88). Therefore, in areas that rely heavily upon diesel fuel to power the whole community, as well as upon alternative sources to power cooking and heating, it is probable that children and adults alike suffer from respiratory issues. Moreover, the WHO statement that “[h]ousing that is difficult or expensive to heat can contribute to poor respiratory and cardiovascular outcomes [...]” (WHO 3) is consistent with one of the leading causes of death of Indigenous people, that of diseases of the circulatory system. For these reasons, reducing the reliance on diesel to power remote northern communities will produce yet another positive social consequence for the health of individuals as a result of improving the conditions within their homes.

With this in mind, Day reports that the source of the Pikangikum fire “was a wood-burning [...] system” (IPS), and he stresses that this method of heating is a safety concern. On the subject of safety, given that many of these northern communities are only accessible by air travel or by ice roads, the safety of the individuals transporting the goods, the communities themselves, and the environment are at risk. Throughout the winter months, truck drivers transporting goods and fuel are putting themselves at risk as they drive in unfavourable conditions, specifically if the ice roads are unsafe due to the thawing of ice, or if they are inaccessible due to winter storms. When adverse weather conditions occur, the communities normally supplied by trucks have no option but to request air deliveries, which, as a result, drastically increases the cost of transportation. This not only puts the pilot of the plane at risk in the case of a storm, it places a strain on the community, as they must be cautious with their supply in the event that obtaining more fuel takes longer than anticipated. Moreover, the transportation of diesel fuel risks harmful environmental effects in the case of a spill. Judith Sayers states that “the fear of diesel spills into precious lakes or sacred sites” (IPS) is something Indigenous people are concerned about. They

are mindful of the safety of the environment, the animals and people that inhabit it, the water sources that run through it, as well as the ancestral sites that encompass their land. Thus, reducing these communities' reliance on diesel will produce positive results by providing members with safer conditions for their lives at home, as well as for the lives of other environmental bodies.

The final social consequence observed in this study in terms of moving towards more sustainable sources for power is the means of development. Mitchell Diabo discusses the reality of his community of Kasabonika Lake, an Indigenous community located 500 miles north of Thunder Bay. He notes that overcrowding occurs because families continue to grow, thus the population of the community increases, but “[n]o new housing, no new buildings, no new anything” can be built due to the “capacity of diesel power” (IPS). In other words, growth within the community's infrastructure is impossible whenever the microgrid reaches its peak limit. Henderson further develops this notion, remarking that the communities' dependency on diesel for power “[s]ocially [...] means the community doesn't have the power for economic development. Jobs are hard to create or maintain or even have” (IPS). Therefore, reducing these northern communities' reliance on diesel would generate growth within their infrastructures: it would facilitate development of additional housing, therefore reducing the percentage of overcrowding. Furthermore, it would provide the opportunity for more businesses to establish themselves within the community, creating more jobs for individuals and thus reducing the percentage of unemployment.

Considering the opportunity for economic growth, it is important to mention that moving towards environmentally sustainable sources for power will also generate more employment within the environmental industry. Henderson notes in his book *Aboriginal Power* that “build[ing] clean-energy capacity” is possible, “[b]ut it requires training, mentorship, advisors, partners, governing systems and investment” (112). In other words, as the projects concerning

renewable energy become reality, they will create initiatives for employment, but not employment for just anyone. Henderson is suggesting that educating, training, and mentoring Indigenous people is necessary to build the infrastructure needed to support renewable energy for three reasons. Firstly, “renewable energy partnerships are maximizing Aboriginal employment and introducing preferred hiring;” secondly, these jobs will primarily be in the remote Indigenous communities of Canada; and thirdly, these employment opportunities “need an inflow of young people who can be trained in green-job skills, something that Aboriginal communities have in abundance” (Henderson 187). Thus, securing more sustainable forms of energy will allow Indigenous communities to grow while enabling Indigenous youth to secure jobs in a field that will guarantee employment opportunities once they have completed their training and certification.

Also important to note is that the impoverished conditions Indigenous people endure so far outlined in this study are situated in the context of colonialism. All of the social aspects these communities currently face result from a history of oppression and subjugation, from the displacement of Indigenous communities “[...] for the benefit and convenience of the government” (IPS), to the horrors of residential schools, to the laws that assure control over the colonized. As stated by Jonathan Kay of the National Post,

[...] the Indian Act created a system that perversely discourages residents from leaving even the most appallingly impoverished reserves — without actually giving them any of the capitalist tools [...] necessary to prosper. This paradox lies at the heart of the cruelty we have inflicted on aboriginal peoples (Kay).

Kay captures the repercussions of colonialism while also identifying a part of the structure that has enabled the persistent disadvantaged conditions of Indigenous people. Indigenous people cannot simply relocate: not only have they already been displaced several times, but their land is

sacred. It is their connection to the past, to their ancestors; they identify with the land. The solution is to finally give these communities the tools they need to thrive: this needs to be rectified to reconcile the wrongs that have been done to the Indigenous Peoples of Canada.

Moreover, attempting to address the social issues discussed in this document reveals the potential that the underlying structural framework that enables the deprivation of these communities can be broken. Each social consequence that will rise from reducing the North's reliance on diesel actively works against the cycle of poverty. Therefore, it seems even more crucial that we address the energy poverty afflicting Indigenous communities.

So far, this discussion has revolved around the social consequences that will be brought by the reduction of diesel dependency in northern communities. For the remainder of this study, the discussion will focus on the cultural consequences that will arise from this change. As mentioned in "Indigenous Power Struggle," Indigenous people have been cast out of conversations regarding decisions that directly impact them (IPS). Wesley-Esquimaux suggests that the Canadian government must "engage the Indigenous community in the conversation" in areas that concern them (IPS). In *Aboriginal Power*, Henderson takes this idea a step further, urging the Canadian government to not only include Indigenous communities in the conversation by just consulting with them, but to include them in every step of the process regarding any kind of change that affects them. He notes that "[...] Canada's First Peoples seek a Respectful, Comprehensive, Proactive, Interactive, Resourced and Substantive community-engagement process" (104).

Answering the call for community engagement, the Canadian government has declared that it is working with Indigenous Peoples in the transition towards sustainable energy, stating that it "is working in partnership with the Assembly of First Nations, Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami, and the Métis National Council [...] in the implementation of the Pan-Canadian Framework"

(ECCC). Furthermore, the Government of Canada states that “[t]hese partnerships will help build stronger, positive relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Canadians” (Natural Resources Canada).

This aspect of including Indigenous communities in the process leads to the first cultural consequence arising from reducing diesel dependency. Because Indigenous communities are involved and interactive with the process, each stage that is reached between the community, businesses, and/or government during the transition toward clean and sustainable energy calls for celebration as it is marking an important milestone. Whenever there is a cause for celebration, traditional ceremonies, though varying in each Indigenous culture, are performed as they carry significant meaning to the people. Henderson notes that Indigenous ceremonies may be performed “when traditional lands are committed to the project, when the project partnership is forged, when the project is named, when the ground is broken for construction and when the initiative is commissioned” (110). Not only does this keep Indigenous cultures alive and thriving, but it also allows non-Indigenous individuals to learn and be immersed in the culture. Non-Indigenous people involved in the process are given insight into a resilient and diverse culture, learning that Indigenous people derive their strength from their cultural, communal, territorial, and ancestral ties. As a way of reconciling with the past, we must encourage the traditional practices of Indigenous cultures. We can do so by involving the community in determining how clean energy methods can be implemented, but also by encouraging Indigenous cultural practices and extending knowledge to non-Indigenous peoples about Indigenous culture. In reference to the previously-mentioned quote by the Government of Canada, this kind of cultural consequence creates strong and promising connections between Indigenous and Canadian culture (Natural Resources Canada).

In a like manner, moving away from diesel to sustainable alternatives provides a second cultural consequence as it promotes the beliefs and attitudes Indigenous cultures have in regards to the environment. Known as stewards of the environment, “Canada’s Aboriginal peoples believe that they are both individually and collectively responsible for protecting Mother Earth” (Henderson 101). Often, it is Indigenous people who are concerned about the exploitation or destruction of the environment. For thousands of years, Indigenous people lived in harmony with nature, never taking more than was needed to support their life. Moving away from diesel, a harmful fuel for the environment, towards sustainable resources denotes that these communities will be able to embrace their traditional cultural beliefs. As stated by the Government of Canada, “[f]unded [clean energy] projects could enable Indigenous communities to harness and use energy in a way that is more compatible with traditional values” (NRCan).

Moreover, in relation to the first cultural consequence gained from moving toward clean energy to power northern Indigenous communities, working with the communities promotes traditional Indigenous beliefs. Henderson reports that when the community is engaged in the process, whenever their interests are taken seriously, whenever they are met with understanding and respect, it “respect[s] [and] adhere[s] to [Indigenous] cultural norms and practices” (100). He provides the example of the Two-Row Wampum Belt to illustrate the coexistence between two parties that share mutual interests. He writes that “[...] the Two-Row Wampum is an agreement between equal parties to travel into the future based on a mutual understanding” (100). Furthermore, as Indigenous people become more involved in the processes of clean energy, their teachings will influence the decisions made and will extend beyond their culture as they become taught in education and training for clean energy employment.

Indigenous people view the environment differently than the traditional, Western way of regarding the environment. In his 1976 essay “A First American Views His Land,” N. Scott

Momaday describes his Indigenous outlook on the environment, which he contrasts with the Western view. His writing is marked by picturesque descriptions of the American landscape. He writes that the Indigenous of North America have a “unique investment in the American landscape,” being that the “investment represents perhaps thirty thousand years of habitation. That tenure is worth something in itself [...],” because “The Indian [...] is at home here,” on the land tying him to his ancestors (Momaday 574).

Momaday posits where such a conception of the landscape begins, noting that “[p]erhaps it begins with the recognition of beauty, the realization that the physical world *is* beautiful” (574). But he goes further with his assessment when he describes his experience with the chief of the Pueblo tribe, a community located in New Mexico. The chief, described as an old man, kept the tribe’s calendar by observing the position of the sun on the skyline each and every morning. It was by these means that he told his people when to plant, harvest, or perform certain ceremonies. Momaday writes that “the image of [...] the old man gazing each morning after the ranging sun – came to represent for me the epitome of that real harmony between man and the land [...]” (577). Indigenous people are in touch with themselves and their surroundings to ensure their survival. As Momaday explains, the Indigenous “comprehension of the earth and air is surely a matter of morality, for it brings into account not only man’s instinctive reaction to his environment but the full realization of his humanity as well [...]” (576). Man is no greater than his environment; he is not there to dominate or to exploit its resources - man exists to live with nature.

This conception of nature contrasts with the Western, anthropocentric view of the environment. Momaday writes that “[i]n our society we conceive the land in terms of ownership and use [...]. Ownership implies use, and use implies consumption. But this way of thinking of the land is alien to the Indian” (580). Though Indigenous people also use the land, their “first truth is that [they] *love* the land; [they] see it as beautiful; [they] delight in it; [they are] alive in

it” (580). As Momaday closes his essay, he makes a call that echoes the goal of ecocriticism: “It is this ancient ethic of the Native American that must shape our efforts to preserve the earth and the life upon and within it” (580).

Indigenous literature, such as Momaday’s essay, as well as Indigenous culture are useful to provide responses and solutions to our current environmental crisis. The fundamental issue underlying climate change is how individuals relate themselves to the environment. The dominant view of looking at the physical world is through the lens of exploitation for financial gain. Not much has changed since Momaday’s 1976 essay, as people still see the land as something to own and to consume, disguising the destruction of the land as human progress. That being said, there is a rise in individuals who are now recognizing the intrinsic value of the environment, and they are demanding change. As Momaday suggests, it is the Indigenous environmental ethic that offers prosperity in addressing current environmental concerns.

This last point introduces the last goal of this study. The long-term project of reducing northern Indigenous communities’ reliance on diesel has the potential to alter Canadian culture. Canada, being a Western country, has had anthropocentric attitudes and views in regards to the environment. Many Canadians view their relationship with the environment and its constituents as hierarchical, placing their needs above those of the environment. In moving away from the traditional Western view towards embracing the Indigenous conception of the environment, as described in Momaday’s essay, Indigenous cultures will ultimately impact Canadian culture. Integrating Indigenous teachings, beliefs and traditions into our conception of the environment as well as into our country’s policies and legislations would allow for cultural blending. As previously mentioned in this study, when Indigenous communities are involved in the transition toward sustainable energy, traditional Indigenous teachings are passed on and are implemented in

green energy knowledge. In return, these traditional teachings transcend Indigenous culture as they will come to influence environmental studies taught in universities and colleges.

To conclude, moving away from diesel for power in northern Indigenous communities will result in multiple and positive social consequences, such as improved water services, the elimination of certain health hazards, and the increased safety of individuals as well as the environment. [I]t will also allow for community and economic development. Overall, reducing the North's reliance on diesel will give these communities the opportunity to grow in ways that are necessary for members to lead prosperous lives. It will also pave the way for positive cultural consequences to develop. Involving Indigenous communities in these transitional processes will encourage and provide non-Indigenous people exposure to traditional ceremonies and knowledge. The transition from diesel to sustainable alternatives in itself promotes the beliefs of Indigenous culture and the views Indigenous peoples hold in relation to the land. Furthermore, this initiative has the potential to influence and change Canadian culture, as well as Western culture overall, as we move away from anthropocentric attitudes to an ecocentric view of the environment.

Though the Canadian government has declared its intention to work with Indigenous communities as well as to implement their traditional knowledge in the process of converting toward a low-carbon economy, one must stress how crucial it is that these northern community projects are realized. Investing in these clean energy projects marks a significant step toward Canada's reconciliation with Indigenous Peoples. In the case of northern Indigenous communities, social poverty is associated with energy poverty. The cycle of poverty felt by this demographic must be addressed to begin reconciliation: the solution repeated throughout this study that could theoretically interrupt this cycle is providing these communities with reliable, sustainable sources of power. Moreover, as the threat of climate change is felt more than ever, Indigenous beliefs and attitudes could be the solution to address the problem. A cultural shift in

perception regarding our relation to the environment is needed if we are to slow down the ecological threat troubling our time.

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