

B.C. municipalities, First Nations, break ground with new deals

Researcher says cooperation at the municipal level is a quietly successful good-news story

Montreal, Quebec – June 4 – First Nations communities and municipal governments in British Columbia are quietly creating and implementing a range of successful cooperation agreements, says a Wilfrid Laurier University researcher.

Those agreements, he adds, are breaking new ground in ways that benefit both groups. In a paper presented at the 2010 Congress for the Humanities and Social Sciences taking place at Montreal's Concordia University, Christopher Alcantara says most of the news stories about First Nations and governments focus on their difficulties and problems at the federal and provincial levels.

Alcantara, an assistant professor at WLU's Department of Political Science, says too little attention has been paid to what is happening at the municipal level. To find out what was happening at that level, Alcantara analyzed series of agreements between First Nations communities and B.C. municipal governments. Those agreements generally concern First Nations communities located immediately adjacent to municipalities.

What he found was that a lot of cooperation was happening quite successfully at the municipal level – cooperation that points the way to progress for everyone in the future. Alcantara says he found four different kinds of agreements.

The first, and most common type, is what he calls jurisdictional, where one party agrees to transfer responsibility for something to the other party. For example, a First Nations community might enter into an agreement with an adjacent municipality for fire protection or garbage collection. "You can't get more mundane than trash collection," he says.

The second kind of agreement is what Alcantara calls relationship-building. These agreements involve statements on intent to work more closely together. Sometimes they are very vague – simply putting into writing an intention to meet several times a year to discuss issues of mutual interest. Other times they can be more specific – for example, recognizing that the municipality will not build an industrial park right next to a residential area on an adjacent reserve.

Alcantara calls the third kind of agreement "decolonialization statements," explaining that a municipality might formally recognize Aboriginal self-government or lands.

The final kind of agreement – and the least common so far – is for capacity-building, in which a municipality agrees to help a First Nations community develop self-government. Alcantara says the number of successful cooperative agreements is increasing, and their nature is changing: At first agreements were about providing services, now they are increasingly about relationship-building.

And he says what seems to be emerging is a new type of joint government structure separate from the First Nation or the municipality – joint recreational committees, for example, or a joint committee to manage a park.

“It’s clear that a lot of today’s problems are highly complex and it’s no longer the case that the First Nation or the municipality can deal with these issues themselves,” he says. “In many cases, cooperation is important. “It has the potential to have a very powerful positive impact on both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people.”

Alcantara’s research, co-authored with Jen Nelles, post-doctoral fellow and researcher with PROGRIS at the University of Toronto, looked only at successful accords, and did not deal with municipalities where cooperation is not happening. He hopes to examine other aspects of cooperation in a next round of research.

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