



Voices and Vision of Northern British Columbia



WILDERNESS
COMMITTEE

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What the region needs to
thrive in a changing world

June 2021

Prepared by

Megan Gordon,

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Acknowledgements

About the Wilderness Committee

The Wilderness Committee is Canada's largest people powered wilderness preservation organization. Our work to maintain a safe climate is an essential part of that mission and it includes a goal of ensuring a just transition for workers and communities who may rely on resource industries. Founded in 1980, the Wilderness Committee is based in Vancouver and operates nationally with offices in Victoria, Winnipeg and Toronto.

About the Author

Megan is a Masters Candidate based out of Prince George who was hired to speak with leaders across the North and develop this report. She has professional experience in climate policy and engagement, Indigenous consultation policy and managing resource sector transition. Her research interests center around the idea of achieving a just transition for workers and communities in northern resource-dependent areas.

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Back: Sikkani Chief River: Peter McCartney

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Executive Summary

Northern BC must be prepared for significant changes over the coming decades as the province begins the work of healing from colonization and tackling climate change. In an effort to learn more about what northern communities need to successfully navigate these changes, we asked leaders from across the region how social movements and the provincial government can support their vision for the future. We learned meeting provincial policy goals around Indigenous rights and climate change comes with unique challenges in the North. At the same time, there are enormous opportunities if northern communities are provided the resources and capacity to take advantage of them.



Near Muskawa-Kechika (John E. Marriott)

Indigenous and settler communities share common interests and a vision for a strong, stable, sustainable economy. They want more collaboration and more involvement in decision-making. But they need support from the provincial government to see their aspirations become a reality. This requires a new approach to funding and decision-making that centres northern experience and on-the-ground realities. It requires learning from one another, understanding and respect.

Northern leaders identified key areas for growth to help communities thrive over the long-term. New jobs, industries and opportunities exist in renewable energy and emissions reductions; reclamation and stewardship; forests and food; tourism and outdoor recreation; small businesses and entrepreneurship; remote work and retirement; arts, culture and the voluntary sector; and support industries. They also highlighted investments necessary to support a thriving, diverse economy, such as infrastructure upgrades; improvements to amenities and municipal services; strengthening the care economy; and better access to education and training. Reconciliation and decolonization underscore all these efforts, as does the need for collaboration between communities and with other levels of government. It was clear from our interviews the province's current approach to economic development across the North is not working. Participants wanted to see profound changes in the distribution of wealth that originates in the region and how decisions are made that affect their communities. This report suggests a number of ways to help communities meet basic community needs and implement provincial policy goals through offering better grants, providing direct funding and redistributing resource revenues. It also supports making adjustments to policy and program delivery, devolving decision-making and fostering collaboration. Policymakers, public servants, civil society organizations and anybody interested in seeing the province respect Indigenous rights and take action on climate change need to listen to and work with northerners to make sure these goals are successful.

Introduction

British Columbia has committed to substantial changes when it comes to upholding Indigenous rights and addressing climate change. However both priorities have already faced significant setbacks, due in large part to conflicting priorities for the North. For the province to achieve these goals, it will require investment in the region in every sense of the word. Communities and nations everywhere need to see a brighter future for their residents and neighbours. British Columbia cannot exclude northerners from the opportunities that await, nor can it ignore the challenges they face over the coming decades.

“The North” makes up over two-thirds of BC by area and has unique needs and a large stake in decisions about resource development. The Wilderness Committee has worked across the North for 40 years and wants to see its people and ecosystems thrive for decades to come. We understand many northern communities rely on resource industries and finding the right balance between environmental, economic and community objectives is often easier said than done.

Given the need for all British Columbians to work together to meet the social, environmental, economic and cultural challenges of the coming decades, the Wilderness Committee believes it’s time to build fresh alliances with northern communities. This will be grounded in our shared interest in ensuring the region’s long-term prosperity, well-being and success. Our first step has been to listen to northern leaders, understand their needs and commit to furthering these conversations within the North and across BC.

Provincial Policy

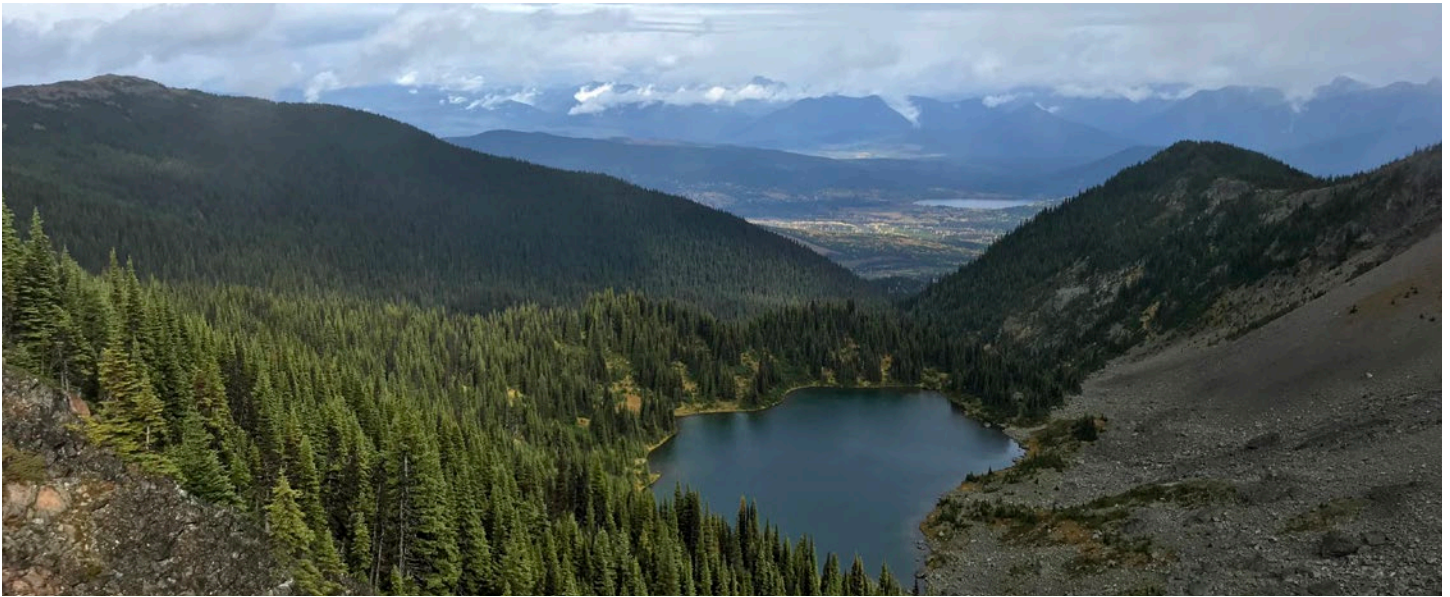
There is a consensus across provincial party lines of the necessity to fight climate change and uphold Indigenous rights. Two major provincial policies have the power to reshape British Columbia and have particular implications for northern communities and resource development.

BC Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples Act

In late 2019, the provincial government passed the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples Act (DRIPA), which committed to aligning the laws of British Columbia with the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP).¹ DRIPA requires the development of an action plan to achieve this over time and regular reporting on progress. DRIPA also allows the provincial government to enter into agreements with a broader range of Indigenous governments. Finally, it provides a framework for decision-making between Indigenous governments and the provincial government on matters that impact Indigenous Peoples.

Clean BC

British Columbia announced its CleanBC climate strategy in 2018 to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. The provincial government has since committed to strengthening its policies to achieve net-zero emissions by mid-century.² CleanBC outlines emissions reduction targets in the areas of transportation, buildings, industry and waste. So far, the province is only on track to reduce emissions back to 2007 levels and far more ambition is needed.



Two Sisters Mountain near Wells (Megan Gordon)

Interviews

From April to May 2021, we spoke individually with 24 leaders from 21 communities across northern British Columbia. Participants ranged from mayors, Chiefs, councillors, city managers and chief administrative officers — all individuals intimately tied to their communities who possessed the knowledge, expertise and lived experiences necessary to relay information on their behalf. Half represented Indigenous Nations and half came from local governments. We recruited through established networks of northern leaders and referrals from interviews. Participants are not named in this report to maintain confidentiality and anonymity.

Realizing the opportunity to unite around northern vitality, foster understanding and identify common objectives, we asked these leaders to tell us about their communities: *What do people love about living in the North? What has changed in recent decades? What needs to happen in the future?* We also asked them about specific projects and initiatives they were proud of, working toward or dreaming about. Finally, we asked them what was needed to achieve their vision.

Our Approach

This report aims to serve several purposes: (1) to highlight key considerations for decision-makers about how to support northern communities; (2) to reflect the voices of northern leaders as accurately as possible; (3) to strengthen understanding about northern realities for people outside the region; and (4) to serve as the basis for ongoing work between the Wilderness Committee and northern communities.

The following summarizes what we learned from northern leaders about the challenges and opportunities they perceive and how the province can support them in realizing their vision for the future while respecting and honouring the land and water, the people and the region's aspirations. This summary is based off of a thematic analysis of recorded and transcribed interviews with participants. This report features quotes from northern leaders themselves as they hold a wealth of knowledge and speak passionately to these topics in their own words. It also features noteworthy projects leaders are proud of to provide readers with a sense of the breadth of initiatives northern communities are working on. We hope this report is a step toward meaningful action and enhanced solidarity across our province.



Stone Mountain Provincial Park, Northern Rockies (Megan Gordon)

Northern communities have shown their strength repeatedly despite these hardships. However, there are real impacts to decades of booms and busts. Indigenous Peoples have connected resource development to missing and murdered Indigenous women, girls and two-spirit people.³ Some communities have faced population decline as job losses force individuals and families elsewhere for work. Prevalent social challenges such as poverty, homelessness and addiction also exist, with limited services and capacity to manage them.⁴ Workers who stay in communities often resort to remote camp work on long shift schedules that keep families apart and cause strain. Despite these challenges, communities remain resilient. This resilience is due to hard-working and resourceful Indigenous and local government leaders, businesses, service providers, volunteers, individuals and families committed to the places they live.

Regional Snapshots

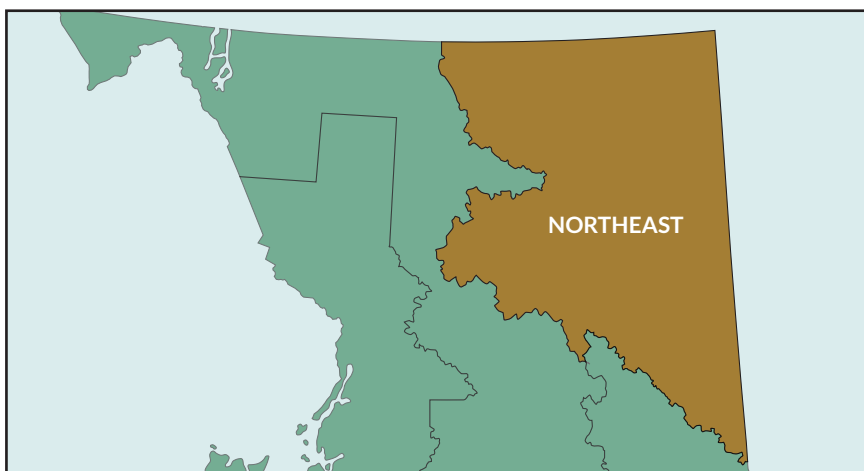
Use of the term “the North” denotes the sense of a monolith. In reality, the North comprises distinct and diverse geographies, ecosystems, populations, identities, cultures, communities and people who have complex and unique histories, origins and perspectives. While there are many ways to identify the North that may be more geographically accurate, for this report, the area in question spans from 100 Mile House to the Yukon border and the Alberta border to the West Coast and the island of Haida Gwaii. There are 62 First Nations and 34 settler communities across the region.⁵ To better understand the diversity in the North, the three key economic regions, the Cariboo, Northeast and North Coast and Nechako are each described in turn.

Cariboo Region



The Cariboo Region comprises the Cariboo and Fraser Fort George regional districts and is located on the traditional territories of the Secwépemc, St'at'l'imx, T̓silhqot'in and Dakelh peoples.⁶ Its total regional population is approximately 154,300.⁷ Prince George is the largest community in the Cariboo Region and serves as a major regional service centre. Manufacturing activities have a strong presence in the Cariboo and many jobs in forestry, mining, fishing, hunting and trapping are located in the region. Currently 29% of jobs are in the goods sector vs. 71% in the service sector, compared to the provincial average employment breakdown of 19% goods to 81% services. Jobs in the goods sector in the Cariboo are heavily dependent on forest sector operations. The top five industries for employment in the Cariboo are healthcare and social assistance (14.4%), manufacturing (10.9%), retail trade (10.5%), construction (9.3%) and education services (6.9%).

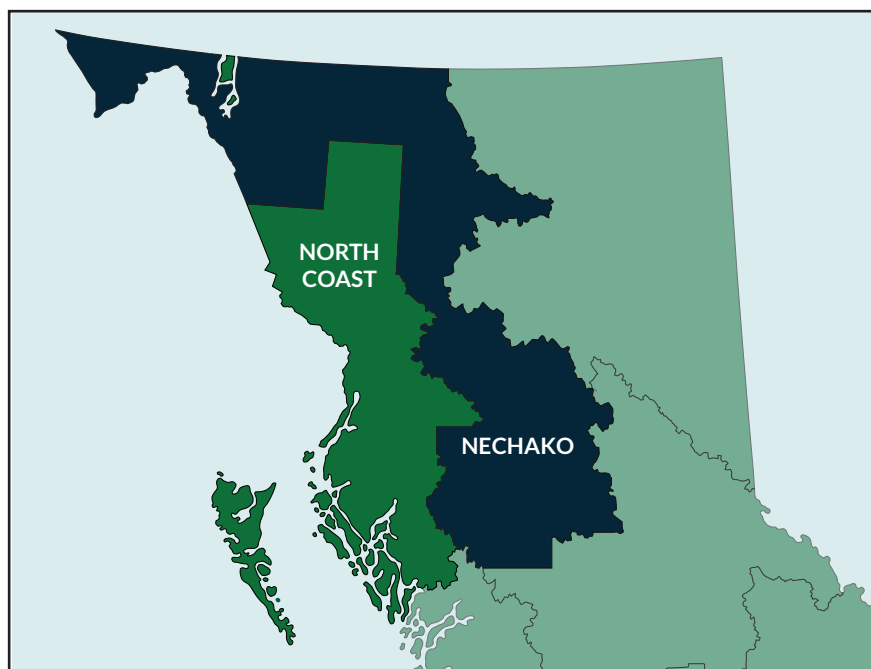
Northeast Region



The Northeast Region comprises the Northern Rockies and Peace River regional districts. It is located on the traditional territories of the Dene Tha' cultural group, the Acho Dene Koe, Kaska Dena and Métis peoples.^{8,9} Northeastern BC is the location of one of few

historic treaties in the province: Treaty 8. The total regional population is approximately 65,700.¹⁰ Between the two regional districts, the vast majority of people reside in the Peace River Regional District. Fort St. John serves as a major regional hub and the location of many oil and gas sector businesses and related contracting services. Agriculture also remains important to the region and has seen impacts from energy developments. The region has less employment in service jobs than most regions, with only 66% in services and 34% in the goods-producing sector. The top five industries for employment in the Northeast are construction (12.7%), mining and oil and gas extraction (10.5%), healthcare and social assistance (9.3%), transportation and warehousing (7.8%) and accommodation and food services (7.3%).

North Coast and Nechako Region



The North Coast and Nechako Region comprises the Bulkley-Nechako, Kitimat-Stikine and North Coast regional districts. It is located on the traditional territories of the Tsimshian, Haida, Tlingit, Nisga'a, Tahltan, Sekani, Kaska Dene, Dakelh and Wet'suwet'en peoples.^{11,12} The total regional population is approximately 96,000.¹³ The Port of Prince Rupert is North America's closest port to Asia, positioning the region as a major trade route.¹⁴ The top five industries for employment in the North Coast and Nechako region are accommodation and food services (11.3%), healthcare and social assistance (11.2%), retail trade (10.7%), manufacturing (10.3%) and construction (9.1%).

What We Heard

While the North is expansive and diverse, leaders all over the region care deeply about their communities. “We all have a lot in common as community leaders who value the quality of life of our people.”

“We all have a lot in common as community leaders who value the quality of life of our people.”

While the media commonly reports on polarization around the resource sector and industrial development within communities, among communities and between regions, northern communities share a greater number of overlapping values and visions. The following section outlines common sentiments we heard across nearly all interviews.

Shared Values:

Working towards a common goal

Northerners share a deep attachment to the places they live. Indigenous and settler communities want to preserve their way of life and protect the land they all enjoy. They want to continue hunting, fishing, trapping, quadding, practicing traditional activities, gathering medicines and taking part in outdoor recreation in the backcountry. They want to maintain the pristine beauty that serves as the backdrop to their adventures. They want bountiful wildlife populations and healthy ecosystems.

“Overwhelmingly, people want the community to have more amenities – to be more attractive. People care about reducing greenhouse gas emissions. People care about the community remaining natural and small. They don’t want it to be large and urban. They want to be able to trust and know their neighbours and they don’t want the wilderness to be decimated.”

Northern leaders acknowledged the role changes in the environment have had on communities. Canada’s Changing Climate Report (2019), a thorough assessment of climate impacts in Canada, confirms these observations and shows northern Canada has warmed and will continue to warm at more than double the global rate.¹⁵

“The winters just aren’t as cold as they used to be. When I was here in 2005, at that time it wasn’t uncommon for the temperature to go as low as -50 degrees Celsius at least once or twice a year. I haven’t seen that this year.”

Environmental disasters and extreme weather events, including forest fires, floods and pest infestations, have destroyed landscapes over the past few decades. Responding to these events has brought communities together to pool resources and strategize on preparing, adapting and preventing disasters in the future. Northerners share a sense of solidarity as a result.

“The first thing is to preserve the land for future generations. Not only for Indigenous people, but for non-Indigenous people too.”

Economic Vision:

Dreaming about the future

Northern residents are deeply tied to the natural resource sector. For many, industry is the foundation of their communities, what supports their families and the source of their livelihood. Northern leaders noted how their residents typically have a greater appreciation for the role natural resource and industrial sectors play in supporting the provincial economy.

Not only are these sectors vital sources of employment, but northern leaders also pointed out that revenues generated in the North provide governments with the resources to deliver public services.

"We can't separate ourselves from these industrial projects. Historically we were a forestry community, a fishing community and a mining community. Our history and existence is the result of CN Rail lines going through these areas. It has always been resource based and continues to be impacted by resource activity."

Northern leaders generally support a balanced approach to resource development. They focus on sustainable, ethical and equitable practices.

"I know a lot of these projects are needed for the things that we all enjoy every day. It is easy to think that there are really dirty or miserable projects, but the truth is these are the projects that keep the province running. When you go to a hospital and get medical care, or your child goes to school, or your highway gets fixed – all those things cost money. And these are the big projects paying for those things."

However, northerners also experience the cumulative impacts of this development in their backyards. This impacts their quality of life. It limits the activities northerners can enjoy.

Northerners understand forested landscapes serve many purposes – they keep the air clean, they are complex ecosystems, they provide recreation opportunities and they produce wood to build communities and homes. Northern leaders want more balance: they want good jobs that support families, they want their economies to flourish, they want stewardship and responsible practices on their land and ultimately, they want to see their communities thrive in the future.

"There is recognition that going green will put more pressure on acquiring certain metals for green energy, or batteries for solar, but how do you do that in a more environmentally friendly way? Not huge mines or multinationals coming to make more money. There is a better way of doing things."

With so much volatility in resource-dependent regions, new industrial projects are often received as a lifeline for communities on the brink of collapse. As much as resource development is still an important driver in the North, more community leaders recognize the need to diversify than ever before.

"The biggest thing is finding a balance – finding a balance between the environment and industry. There has to be preservations in place for future generations. We can't extract everything, cut all the trees down and expect the land just to heal itself overnight. There needs to be more thought and more process in all aspects of it."

Communities that underwent significant growth in the mid-20th century or were established as "instant towns" alongside major development projects have now experienced (often multiple) cycles of boom and bust and are becoming disenchanted with single-industry reliance and dependency. Resource sector volatility has taken a toll not only on northern economies but also on residents' social health and mental wellness. Entire families have been uprooted when forced to move away to find work.

"I would like the community to have a diversified economy – a stronger everything outside of industry. More goods and service, more professionals, more retail. More restaurants, more tourism. Most of our money on goods and services leaves the community because we don't have a lawyer, we don't have enough accountants or physiotherapists."

“In 2014 we had a timber swap with another community and that really changed the face of the community. It really changed our community in the sense that you just knew everyone in the community. And then in 2014 with that mill dropping out, a lot of people moved out and new ones came in. And there were aftershocks, not just the mill employees and loggers but their spouses, volunteers, coaches, ambulance drivers. Spouses were teachers or worked at the clinic. Lots of our clubs like hiking and trails lost key members. It was a really big shakeup. There was the financial hit and then there was the hit of the people we lost – the friends and neighbours and people that had been here forever.”

Leaders understand the importance of long-term and sustainable solutions. They know northern communities must be ready and flexible to take advantage. A paradigm shift is occurring where economic development involves multiple sectors, multiple priorities and place-based approaches that strive to make communities even better places to live.

Northern leaders noted how residents recognize the need to protect the environment more than they did a decade ago. Communities are actively working on sustainability initiatives and greenhouse gas emissions reduction projects. Many noted the potential greater energy independence and renewable energy development as economic opportunities, as the province moves forward on climate action.

Collaboration: Striving for unity

Despite some of their differences, Indigenous and settler communities in northern BC recognize they go further together than alone. They want to address past wrongs among their communities, settle disputes and work together as neighbours.

Leaders noted the important strides they took to repair relationships, build trust and foster understanding between their communities, such as establishing collaborative councils, hosting events together and sharing a meal.

Participants also acknowledged healing must occur not only among communities but also within communities, like resolving and defining roles for traditional vs. elected governance. A common belief was that there was a role for the province to help bring communities together by providing resources and logistical support – but **not** by interfering with the relationships.

“From my perspective, there has been an evolution in peoples’ worldviews everywhere. Attitudes are certainly changing. There is pride in industry and pride in the contributions that it makes to the economy. But one of the focuses that have changed has been a focus on safety and environmental sustainability.”

“Our construction company and reclamation company have been in consistent talks with the Oil and Gas Commission and the province with the program they rolled out on orphan well reclamation and abandonment funding. That is going to bring a lot of economic opportunity to the nation. It is initiatives like that that show there is a shift where people are starting to think more about the environment and what we can do to protect it.”

“We have so much potential to work together on all the projects we do. There is no need to be siloed and do it alone. And I think that is part of what the province’s issues are. They have segregated and segregated and segregated for so long and that segregation causes divides and racism and unfairness. When things aren’t fair, you create division.”

“It’s that close relationship. I have spent time just pouring out concerns about what we have with addiction, healthcare, all those things. I have cried with Chiefs. We have a really close relationship – why? Because we have to. We live here. This is our place. This river is our river.”

Part of this healing and rebuilding is fostering understanding. This includes addressing systemic and interpersonal racism. Some leaders observed misconceptions, discrimination and ignorant views in their communities toward Indigenous Peoples. First Nations want to see settler communities make more effort to help residents learn from and respect one another through education and empathy.

"[The province] can sit on the sidelines until we figure it out. It is not in their nature to do that though. As a government, they feel they must intervene."

Settler leaders overwhelmingly expressed a desire to see Indigenous neighbours achieve restitution and are actively moving away from the "us vs. them" mentality.

"Racism is born from people thinking Indians don't pay taxes, they don't have to work and they get everything for free. There's a misconception about the atrocities that happened in the past. Until people can be properly educated of what actually happened, it's pretty hard to battle racism and have a true reconciliation."

Many northern leaders noted how some government funding structures pitted communities against one another. Communities know collaboration works better than competition and the governments must design programs to foster unity rather than provoke a fight for limited resources.

"The people of this area, by far the majority of them, want to build good relationships with First Nations. They want to make sure First Nations receive what they are due."

"I have been at it for a while. At first, early on, I still saw a lot of competition where the attitude was: 'we are trying to get this, so you don't get it', or, 'you're after that so we are going to try to get it first.' I don't see that anymore. I think there is a real sense along the corridor that we are all stronger with the community beside us healthy."

Decision Making: Challenging the status quo

Northerners are growing frustrated with entrenched processes and power dynamics between local, provincial and federal governments. Leaders described a pervasive disconnect between the people making decisions and a grasp of the realities these decisions carry for northern communities. They expressed resentment towards "one-size fits all" policy approaches as these are sometimes incompatible with northern living. While these decisions are oriented to benefit the population centres in the province, they potentially carry a greater impact on people in rural and northern communities.

"Sometimes decisions made do not reflect the vastness of the province. Where is that disconnect? How does that flow into the North? We see that all the time – decisions and policy being made support the majority of the population of the province and ignore northern communities."

Both Indigenous and settler communities indicated they want a more meaningful role in decision-making **at a minimum**. This involves early consultation to provide input and feedback before policies and decisions are set in stone.

"One of the hard parts is local decision-making in the North – we are always the last to be told of a decision that is made in Victoria. And that is a real challenge and a frustration."

Beyond consultation, input and feedback, some communities want more power and control over economic activities in the region. This would allow them to make their own spending decisions with provincial transfers rather than compete with other communities for limited grants that are time-, place-, or project-specific. Local leaders are

intimately connected to their communities. They know the people, they know the land, they know their challenges and they understand the opportunities and solutions.

Indigenous communities, in particular, are in a unique position as rightsholders. For centuries, governments have made and broken promises. With the most recent iteration of reconciliation attempts, such as introducing DRIPA, Indigenous Nations expect better. They want their treaties honoured, laws respected and rights upheld

In many cases, this means becoming financially independent and self-governing. Indigenous Peoples want to be a part of decision-making and want to be considered equal partners as sovereign nations

The above sentiments lay out common ground and direction for moving forward. The remaining sections of the report outline where communities need support to take control of their futures, protect the environment and build and strengthen relationships.

"On the connectivity side – internet and cell phone – what would be helpful is not to have to go through grant hoops to get the money. What would be nice is if the provincial and federal governments would just transfer the money directly to local governments. We are on the ground, we know exactly what the needs are and that gives us the ability to really go out and make it happen fairly quickly."

"I think the province needs to recognize the Indigenous laws of the land. The laws are a key component to what the province is trying to do, but what I tend to see is that the province gets wrapped up in policy and procedures. Whereas the law of the land is more simple. If you take something, you have to put something back."

"In the next 30 years we should have our statistics improved. Each of the communities should be financially independent, as in, not dependent on Indigenous Services Canada funding to operate their administration and programs. The social conditions: health and wellbeing should be improved significantly. And we should be self-governing by then, we should have a self-governing model that our people can operate with independently and collectively."



Visitors look at a dug-out cotton wood canoe at the Lheidli T'enneh and Huble Homestead Fish Camp (Brent Braaten)

Challenges

To understand how communities can move forward, the challenges, barriers and obstacles in their way cannot be ignored. This section draws attention to some of the common and recurring challenges northern communities experience. Not all communities face the same set of challenges. However, the following captures the variety northern leaders noted during interviews.

Challenges for Northern Residents

Economic volatility:

Boom and bust cycles have been a feature of northern economies for decades and with each downturn in global commodities markets comes facility closures, layoffs and population declines. At the same time rapid growth when new projects get underway strains local services and infrastructure and leads to housing shortages or rent increases.

“For a period of five years, there were work camps built and a huge influx of workers and professionals with families who lived in the community. This resulted in a huge social cost in terms of a housing crisis. People on fixed incomes had to leave the community.”

Cost of living:

Everything seems to cost more in the North. Despite being surrounded by forests and forestry, building homes and businesses is expensive. Basics such as groceries but also things vital to businesses like computers have to come a long way via truck, even if they arrive via boat. Harsh winters and poor infrastructure mean high energy bills for northern residents, especially those who rely on diesel generators. Finally, property taxes can push well beyond local incomes as municipalities rely more and more on their residents to pay for services and infrastructure.

“One of the crazy things - the cost of building a structure here is about \$800 a square foot, where in lots of places that cost is around \$200-300.”

Climate change:

Warming temperatures and changes to rain and snowfall patterns create significant difficulties for northerners. Extreme weather events like fires and flooding often impact the communities with the least capacity and resources to respond. Diseases, pests and other infestations have led to staggering economic, cultural and biodiversity losses. Longer growing seasons offer some new possibilities, but unpredictability makes it hard to take advantage.

“I think the biggest thing I've noticed is the climate. Less snow in the winter, more rain, hotter summers, drought conditions sometimes. Probably in the last 15-20 years we have seen more significant changes. In the winter we would get snow right around the end of October and it would stay.”

Cumulative impacts:

Northerners have faced multiple forms of resource development at once, especially in the Peace Region where logging, hydro dams, coal mining, fracking for gas and agriculture all layer upon each other. Traditional food sources have become more scarce and enormous effort must now be made to save endangered species. Water and air pollution raise concerns for the health of nearby residents.

“I had conversations with the elders and they told me that when they were young, the changes that they saw from then to nowadays are horrendous. Historically, we would leave now. The resources are depleted – not by our own hands but by everything that has gone on around us. Cumulative impacts from industrial development are massive around us.”

Challenges for Indigenous and Local Governments

Ageing infrastructure:

Homes, buildings, roads, bridges, water systems and other critical infrastructure constructed during resource industry booms in the mid-20th century are coming of age and need to be repaired, upgraded or replaced. Infrastructure deficits are common in small northern communities and better quality housing is needed on many reserves.

“If communities don’t have the money to fix the aging infrastructure that they have, which is everywhere, they don’t have the money to worry about emissions. You are just trying to survive as a community.”

Social issues:

Social challenges in communities are connected to the long-term impacts of resource sector volatility and systemic and institutional issues. This includes intergenerational impacts of the residential school system, colonization, loss of land and erosion of traditional rights. Workers and residents who experience the consequences of sudden economic shocks may experience stress and mental health challenges. Over time, unaddressed issues can lead to substance use, poverty and homelessness.

“One of the things that COVID has brought out is the reality of our situations. We have tremendously high addiction rates and suicide rates, and we have an opioid crisis that is still very big. We need to do a lot of healing and wellness capacity building in our communities before we can build those technical skills in our population. It is building blocks, and there aren’t many dollars around to do that specific work.”

Lack of services:

Small communities, in particular, may not have the population or resources available to support a broad array of provincial and local government services, nor businesses and amenities. Indigenous communities often rely on neighbouring settler communities to go to school or receive healthcare. People in small communities often have to travel to larger communities or regional centres for medical appointments, specialized goods, airports, recreation and entertainment.

“Our medical centre is fairly equipped, but not capable of everything, obviously. Pregnancies have to go out of town.”

Barriers to Change

Capacity:

Indigenous communities with limited staff and resources often experience “consultation fatigue” from being inundated with academic, industry and government consultation requests. Many northern communities often struggle to undertake preventative, proactive work, keep up with grant opportunities and manage burdensome application processes with limited staff capacity and shovel-ready projects. It is similarly more difficult to enact change.

“The number one excuse for upholding the status quo is capacity. Staff are so busy with existing projects and work, much of which is related to the needs of industry, that they don't have time for new, progressive initiatives.”

Centralized decision-making:

Northern residents often feel removed and excluded from decisions made in policy centres like Victoria and Ottawa. They perceive southern values as being “imposed” in the North in ways that do not take northern priorities or values into consideration. This is exacerbated by governments’ dwindling presence in regional offices.

“The feds control it all and they pay us a minimum per capita. They control the decision-making as to what we can and cannot do – both through the purse strings and through policy. That needs to change.”

Policy incompatibility:

Broadly applied provincial policies often do not take the circumstances of rural or northern communities into account. As a result, northern communities may be disproportionately impacted by government decisions or miss out on opportunities because of incompatibility with northern realities.

“How will electric cars work at -30 degrees Celsius? How will the province's plan to stop the sale of gas-powered vehicles by 2040 affect someone in the Northern Rockies?”

Weak consultation:

Indigenous and settler communities commonly felt that consultation and engagement processes were inadequate and unsubstantial. Leaders reported that processes were often last-minute, felt like a “box-checking exercise” and the province did not use input and feedback in a meaningful way. Nations with strained capacity often felt overwhelmed by the short amount of time provided to respond to requests on matters concerning their rights.

“It is really difficult when the province is in control of everything and they don't tell us or involve us unless they have to. And even though they have good intentions and try to work with us, they are not working with us to really include us and involve us. There's a lot of work to do for our rights to be truly recognized.”

Development Limitations

Bias toward major projects:

Funding available for development is often geared toward “megaprojects” rather than smaller-scale projects with local control that may have a lesser environmental impact. Many small-scale projects can produce similar results to large-scale projects. However, governments often prefer megaprojects because they are easier to administer and mean more money for industry proponents. Some communities are beginning to question the benefits megaprojects bring to the North as many employ people from other parts of Canada, rather than locals, and revenues often leave the community.

“[The province] should be looking at diversifying their energy portfolio instead of putting everything in one basket with hydro. When they announced Site C they killed independent power producers. A lot of First Nations were involved in those projects.”

Corporate control:

Major companies hold significant lobbying and bargaining power in industrial and resource development. Communities sometimes feel as though industry proponents are treated more favourably than local leaders. Some Indigenous leaders also noted instances where they felt as though they were “pitted against” one another by industry, or felt taken advantage of by companies who overpromise and underdeliver.

“I always feel that when megaprojects or big projects go in the area, the government works hand-in-hand with the companies. We are filled in a little bit and told how it will go. A lot of the time we are not in there early enough talking about things.”

Technology:

Presently, more advancements and incentives are needed to make clean technology feasible and affordable for small, northern communities and provide them with the chance to capitalize on more sustainable and low-carbon economic opportunities. Existing subsidies are aimed primarily at supporting oil and gas extraction.

“We pump billions of dollars into the oil and gas sector as tax incentives, whatever the case may be, to keep them alive. Yet, we are not putting anywhere near, if at all, any resources into promoting and actually fostering renewable energy.”



Old house in Kwadacha in front of the new health centre/Kwadacha First Nation administration office under construction (Prince George Citizen staff)

Opportunities

We asked northern leaders to imagine what their communities could look like in 30 years. We also asked them to tell us about how they thought they could get there. Northern leaders recognized the imperative to diversify their economies, reduce greenhouse gas emissions, care for the land, sustainably develop resources and support service and care sectors. They also wanted to see economic and population growth, community improvements, better infrastructure, more education and jobs and increased health and wellness outcomes. Finally, they wanted to improve and strengthen relationships with their neighbours. The following section describes the areas leaders identified to achieve northern vitality.



Children watering the Urban Garden Project at Exploration Place Museum (David Mah)

Growing and Diversifying Northern Economies

Northern leaders named new and existing sectors where they saw promising opportunities for growth and expansion. For this report, we have grouped these sectors thematically: (1) renewable energy and emissions reductions; (2) reclamation and stewardship; (3) forests and food; (4) tourism and outdoor recreation; (5) small businesses and entrepreneurship; (6) remote work and retirement; (7) arts, culture and the voluntary sector; and (8) support industries. These growth areas have not undergone any formal economic benefit analysis or feasibility assessments. Success is dependent on a number of other factors, including local circumstances, physical and natural infrastructure, place-based assets and other considerations.

It is important to note that northern leaders did not simply point to one of the above sectors as a solution for their economy. Rather they believed supporting multiple sectors in tandem could help diversify and increase resilience.

Reflections on the idea of a “*just transition*”

A just transition is a policy goal and a set of practices meant to minimize the harmful impacts of industrial and economic transitions on workers and communities.¹⁶ When economies change, workers must be supported with retraining and new opportunities so they do not take on a disproportionate share of negative impacts. Sectors we describe in this section do not necessarily provide a one-for-one replacement for traditional sectors. Northern leaders must consider community and worker impacts and critically analyze the kinds of employment opportunities a given sector provides. By doing this they can determine how many jobs could be created, what kind of compensation could be offered and how suitable the jobs would be for locals based on values and interests.

Renewable Energy and Emissions Reductions

Northerners recognize the ways the climate is changing. This recognition, in turn, affects the kinds of jobs, industries and lifestyles that are available to them. Northern leaders expressed strong interest in initiatives to lower greenhouse gas emissions and reduce communities' carbon footprints.

Not only were mitigation and adaptation activities supported – northern communities have already demonstrated leadership in establishing local priorities, projects, initiatives and community plans that serve to benefit the environment. Northern communities have taken actions such as hiring sustainability coordinators and have incorporated the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals into local economic development processes. Nearly all have signed on to the Union of British Columbia Municipalities (UBCM)'s 2007 Climate Action Charter.

"In 30 years the community would be all on solar power or wind. It would be independent. There would be a reduction on use of fossil fuels and more environmental awareness."

Dawson Creek hired an energy manager specifically for the purpose of increasing energy efficient infrastructure. Their salary is paid for by BC Hydro and their first project was to replace the city's high-pressure sodium street lamps with LEDs which are 66% more efficient.¹⁷

Northern leaders continue to express interest and take steps toward retrofitting buildings, upgrading energy systems, purchasing energy-efficient vehicle fleets for local government services and installing Electric Vehicle (EV) charging stations in their communities. These initiatives provide jobs for local tradespeople and reduce municipal energy costs. Furthermore, they have expressed interest in seeing major highways and transportation corridors becoming electrified, like Highway 16 and Highway 97.

Northern leaders also see value in increasing local energy security. Solar, wind and geothermal power could be used to help heat homes and buildings and transition away from more polluting forms of energy. New sources of renewable energy also offer potential.

Communities also expressed interest in developing their energy utilities, expressing some frustration with the monopoly BC Hydro holds. Ironically, some communities in major gas extraction and distribution areas are not hooked up to the provincial grid and face high energy costs.

With provincial or federal support, larger scale energy projects could be developed, creating local jobs, increasing community independence and resilience and bringing in revenues to municipalities and First Nations.

"Our future looks bright. Everybody's going to need gas or they're going to need to plug in somewhere soon. So when they change the pumps from gas to electricity, people can plug in and do a quick charge on their way up to Alaska. We're going to be there."

"There are other opportunities for renewable energy too. There are many waterways in our area where we could have run-of-river opportunities. As well as solar. We get a lot of bluebird days here."

"We are looking at solar energy opportunities, primarily to get us off BC Hydro because the costs of having hydro in the community are astronomical. We have families deciding whether to pay rent or pay their hydro bill or feed their families."



The City of Prince George Downtown Renewable Energy System
(Prince George Citizen Staff)



Hudson Hope community solar initiative installed solar panels
(Peter McCartney)

Hudson’s Hope is home to the Hudson’s Hope Community Solar Initiative, the largest municipal solar project in British Columbia. Nine district buildings are powered by rooftop photovoltaics, including the curling club, visitor’s centre and public pool. Altogether it provides 500 MW of power and saves the district \$70,000 a year in energy costs.¹⁸

In 2021, **Saulteau First Nation** completed the Sukunka Wind Energy Project in partnership with Natural Forces, a 15 MW, four-turbine wind farm. This project is the largest majority Indigenous-owned wind farm in Canada and can supply power for 5,800 homes.¹⁹

Fort Nelson First Nation recently announced the Clarke Lake Geothermal Project, which will use mid-grade geothermal heat to generate 15 megawatts of clean electricity. The federal government invested \$40.5 million to support this project.²⁰

Reclamation and Stewardship

When it comes to values related to work, some northern leaders noted how workers sometimes faced internal conflicts about employment in industries that cause environmental harm.

Northern leaders know residents want to be stewards of their land. Communities face the immediate consequences of large-scale resource development. To preserve the places they live, they want land reclamation and rehabilitation done right. This can be challenging due to how the economy is structured – there is presently limited economic incentive to ensure the land is properly restored when industrial activities end.

Communities supported the idea of building a “reclamation economy.” Indigenous Nations in the Northeast have demonstrated leadership in this area by establishing reclamation companies with greenhouses and nurseries. They are actively working to secure contracts with government, industry and other partners to clean up abandoned well sites, rehabilitate wildlife populations, regrow forests impacted by fires and collect vegetation from proposed development sites to ensure native plant species will be returned to the land in the future.

“I feel bad for the mine closing. I had family working there for years and years. A lot of us were happy that it closed because it was something you get stuck in. Even though you are working there you are watching your environment get destroyed and you just have to keep working there because you are getting a paycheque.”

“Rehabilitation and reclamation is one we have been working on for a while. The province has identified it now as a growing concern for them. They make no money in that – that is why it’s not happening. They can’t figure out how to make a dollar out of it.”

"We've lived with the impacts of oil and gas development for 50 years or so and we're left with the damage. Now we're hoping to be part of the cleanup and restoration. We have always been a bit of a leader in pushing that forward."

Stewardship can also take the form of "Indigenous Guardians" programs that provide First Nation members with the opportunity to be out on the land. They are hired as monitors and guides to take care of it and make sure visitors treat it with respect. Guardians are the eyes and ears for Indigenous Nations on their territories, using traditional knowledge and practicing their culture to steward their lands and waters for future generations.

Gitanyow Hereditary Chiefs have established the Gitanyow Lax'Yip Guardians program. Its purpose is to: (1) act out Gitanyow Ayookxw and the Gitanyow Huwilp Recognition and Reconciliation Agreement and Land Use Plan; (2) monitor, provide training and employ Gitanyow Wilp members; (3) work in collaboration with federal and provincial governments and the neighbouring Wet'suwet'en and Gitxsan Nations; (4) provide field assistance; and (5) build protocols and capacity with the Coastal Stewardship Network.²¹

Communities are also working toward restoring threatened wildlife populations through small and medium scale initiatives that could be expanded.



Moose bull (John E. Marriott)



Sockeye salmon (John E. Marriott)

West Moberly First Nation has a seven-generation long plan to recover the caribou back to sustainably harvestable levels, including the Klinse-Za Caribou Maternity Pen. This project aims to reverse the population decline of the threatened Klinse-Za herd while evaluating the biological and economic effectiveness of maternal penning as a conservation strategy.²²

Vanderhoof is home to the Nechako White Sturgeon Conservation Center (NWSCC), whose efforts focus on the research, conservation and public education of the endangered Nechako White Sturgeon. A major component of the NWSCC is a hatchery that raises and releases juvenile sturgeon into the Nechako River to help recover the population, which has seen a decline and poor survival rates due to impacts such as habitat alteration and over-fishing.²³



Toad River, Northern Rockies (Megan Gordon)

Communities also see the value in proactively preserving and fostering a healthy environment. Northern leaders noted the importance of supporting healthy watershed ecosystems, improving river health, addressing and preventing wildlife and fish shortages, and protecting water.

“When it comes to harvesting trees or moose or salmon, there needs to be a respect component. There also needs to be compassion to look after the land and species that are at risk. And First Nations tend to do that in spades.”

Nadleh Whut’én developed the Yinka Dene ‘Uza’hné which regulates surface water in their territory. This agreement requires consent for all decisions affecting rivers, lakes, streams and creeks. It also contains binding surface water management policy and quality standards.²⁴

Doig River First Nation is working on a water quality monitoring project with the BC Oil and Gas Commission. This pilot water monitoring study takes a collaborative approach with First Nations, government and consultants working together to select water and climate monitoring locations in the Northeast. The combining of traditional knowledge and western science can be used to inform decisions and support the rights of the Treaty 8 First Nations.²⁵



Witset Canyon (Megan Gordon)

Forests and Food

Forestry continues to drive many local economies in northern BC. With the 2019 downturn in the interior forest sector, northern leaders recognize permanent changes are taking place, which will impact employment, local manufacturing facilities, harvesting and related contracting services and businesses. Northern leaders noted the potential silviculture, innovative harvesting techniques and more specialized or “value-added” forest products could have for local economies.

“Somebody recently purchased an industrial site who wants to do some kind of value-added business. So I think that would be good for the region and the residents here. It’s a kind of job where people can own homes and raise families, it is not a camp or transitory job.”

Quesnel’s Forest Initiatives Program includes a suite of initiatives to develop home-grown solutions to forest-sector transition and move towards a sustainable future for the community. It offers training, planning, restoration, wildfire protection programs, research and development on innovative forest sector products and harvesting techniques.²⁶

Haida Nation is known as a leader in secondary manufacturing of wood products. **Taan Forest** is a 100% Haida-owned forest sector company that emphasizes forest stewardship and ensuring forest practices on Xaayda Gwaay.yaay Haida Gwaii are in line with Haida values.²⁷

McLeod Lake Indian Band began to replant a forest on their reserve in May 2021 through the **Little Trees-Big Trees (Gat’Azi-Gat’Cho) project**. This project aims to restore 3,750 hectares of trees damaged by the Omineca region spruce beetle infestation. Six million trees will be planted, which is estimated to absorb 550,000 tonnes of carbon pollution.²⁸



Brock Paciejewski gets some early season fishing in on Saturday morning at McMillian Creek Fishing Park on the Nechako River (James Doyle)

Some communities are looking at the potential of biorefineries to produce goods made out of trees such as clothing, wood or tires rather than from oil-based synthetics.

Quesnel has advocated for more investment in the bioeconomy to make N-95 Masks and other medical items, realizing the opportunity to support efforts to slow the COVID-19 pandemic while also helping the local forest industry evolve.²⁹

Community forests can also foster more local control over natural resources and help communities directly reap the benefit of development. Some communities expressed a desire for increased access to timber to realize greater benefits a renewed, more localized approach to forestry could provide. This includes local employment benefits as well as collaboration opportunities between neighbouring Indigenous and settler communities.

“One of the first things we are working toward is access to timber. We have a couple of very small timber harvesting licenses, but we have the capacity and aspiration to become much more involved in timber harvesting in the territory.”

Fraser Lake’s Community Forest is an important sustainability initiative that employs approximately 70 people in environmentally and socially responsible roles and involves habitat restoration, sustainable harvesting and integrated manufacturing.³⁰

Communities also noted the economic and environmental benefits of fostering greater local food security. Food hubs or centres for storing, distributing and growing food like community gardens and greenhouses can support local businesses, farmers, restaurants and cafes. Support for more small-scale agriculture, rather than large, multinational agriculture operations, could support local farmers and use land responsibly. Furthermore, harvesting “non-timber forest products” such as pine mushrooms, berries and medicinal plants could serve as an economic opportunity for communities.³¹

Tourism and Outdoor Recreation

One of the many reasons northerners love their communities is the proximity to nature and wilderness. They see economic potential in sharing their spectacular landscapes with the world. Growing and expanding local tourism and outdoor recreation sectors is a natural choice for communities, particularly those undergoing transition and change. Nearly three-quarters of northern leaders identified tourism as a top priority growth area.

“A lot of people are interested in tourism. They want more tourism in the area. And they want the local area to be taken care of to support tourism.”

Northern leaders listed backcountry recreation activities visitors take advantage of: snowshoeing, snowmobiling, hunting, fishing, trapping, hiking, skiing, mountain biking, camping, swimming and boating. Companies offering sports outfitting, guided wildlife tours, educational and cultural tours and eco-tourism could also support the local economy. Infrastructure like campsites, RV parks, cabins and trail building can facilitate these activities. Northern leaders also identified the potential for initiatives to increase tourism, such as advertising and marketing campaigns, lighting and signage upgrades, and taking advantage of locations along major travel routes like the Alaska Highway and Highway 16.

Communities recognize responsible tourism and outdoor recreation can bring tourists to support the local hospitality sector, help advance land and wildlife protection and increase cultural awareness and education.



Rail museum and tiny train, Prince George (Dave Milne)

Tumbler Ridge received official UNESCO Global Geopark site designation in 2015 for its world-class dinosaur trackways and fossils which includes 2.1 million acres of mountains and foothills around the community.³²

Furthermore, local ownership of tour, guide, outfit, sports, recreation and other companies can ensure locals have greater autonomy over the activities that are taking place in their backyards, ensuring they respect and honour local values. Locally-driven tourism and outdoor recreation activities can directly support entrepreneurs, create jobs and prevent overharvesting and degradation to the land.

Northern leaders noted it was important rightsholders and area directors be involved in tourism and outdoor recreation planning initiatives as it often takes place in rural areas outside of municipal boundaries.

“A lot of people wanted us to buy the local lodges on the rivers and possibly have hunting and guiding. There are a lot of things associated with hunting and guiding that could be not so good for us. But maybe if our own people were doing the hunting and guiding, they would make sure we are not over-hunting or over-fishing. If we take care of the area and the environment is healthy, people will want to come here.”

Small Businesses and Entrepreneurship

Communities need to diversify tax bases, especially if they rely on a large industrial facility like a sawmill or a mine. Diversifying the economy is imperative, particularly given the risks of single-industry-reliant towns as tax bases often shift to rely more heavily on property taxes. Diversifying the composition of businesses and supporting new economic drivers can help communities be more resilient to drastic economic shocks and fluctuations in the global market economy.

Entrepreneurs, small and medium-sized businesses and supporting remote working opportunities for residents can help grow the population and thus increase the residential tax base. Modernization in the North is similarly important as the world becomes more reliant on the internet to conduct business. Digital start-ups may be looking to open their first offices in more affordable communities than traditional tech centres where rents are prohibitive for their business and its employees. Connectivity is imperative in supporting modern businesses to grow and expand their markets.

Companies specializing in green technology and innovation could help the province to meet its environmental objectives while also driving economic activity. Northern communities need support to benefit from these projects and small businesses need help scaling up. While distance from markets may be a barrier, opportunities may arise with government intervention and targeted action.

“A big one for me, from the generation I come from, is moving the community forward with modernization and tech. I think we are going to see a lot more emphasis on green energy moving forward. My goal is to keep us on the cutting edge and don’t get left behind so we can take advantage of opportunities that come up.”

Remote Work and Retirement

Municipalities such as Tumbler Ridge have had success rebranding the community from an “industry town” to better suit retirees who wanted larger properties, quieter living and increased access to nature. Attracting new residents from urban areas can help bring in more property taxes and create a more stable population to support local economies. However, access to advanced healthcare is necessary to support an influx of seniors.

A similar opportunity exists with the COVID-19 pandemic resulting in a significant increase in demand for housing in rural areas as people leave cities and have more opportunities to work remotely. Towns such as Smithers and Valemount have had success leveraging their natural amenities to attract a new generation of relatively high-earning residents who can work from home.

“People can do a lot of jobs from anywhere as long as they have good internet. I’d like to see people who enjoy the kind of lifestyle that the community has to offer move here from anywhere in the world and continue to do their business online.”

Both **Valemount** and **Smithers** are examples of how communities have taken place-based planning approaches and capitalized on natural assets to diversify in the face of uncertainty in the traditional forest-dependent economies. They leveraged surrounding mountains, their locations along major highways and new visitor centres for skiing and snowmobiling tourism and to attract new residents.³³

Arts, Culture, and the Voluntary Sector

Arts and culture can also further similar objectives like economic diversification, improving quality of life and increasing tourism. First Nations communities see arts, culture and language promotion and revitalization as essential in forwarding resurgence and reconciliation. Many communities have made significant strides and efforts to pass on traditions that are spearheaded informally by Elders. This can be challenging in communities that lack the resources to meet more immediate survival needs like housing or clean water.

Some communities have taken it upon themselves to showcase their culture and host festivals inviting neighbouring communities to participate.



Dawson Creek Stampede

Community organizations, non-profits and volunteers are critical to northern economies, particularly in communities where services are limited, strained, or far away.

Tumbler Ridge runs the TR Cares service in partnership with Northern Health that provides free transportation for residents with medical appointments in other towns like Chetwynd, Dawson Creek, Grand Prairie and Fort St. John.³⁵

Opportunities to grow local culture in communities could also include increasing a food and beverage sector, growing local sports, concerts and events and hosting festivals.

"A lot of our people still practice the culture and traditions and a lot of people want to learn. We have a lot of band members who live off reserve as well and members on and off reserve have expressed a need to be involved in everything for the community and be involved in the culture and language as well. People are very supportive of the culture and language – and revitalizing the culture and language."

"Everyone is so welcoming when people come here. Everyone loves to showcase our culture, our traditions, our language. We have a lot of people who still practice and maintain our culture and it's a huge priority to pass on to the future generations."

Doig River First Nation hosts the annual "Doig Days" festival to showcase their culture and way of life. This includes demonstrating traditional practices such as beaver skinning, moose hide processing and holding interactive activities such as hand games, drumming, bannock making, blanket toss and archeological digs. The event is regularly attended by students, parents and teachers throughout School District 60.³⁴

Wells hosts the ArtsWells Festival each year, sponsored by a number of local and provincial organizations, which showcases hundreds of artists working in an array of art forms and musical genres.³⁶

Terrace is home to the Freda Diesing School of Northwest Coast Art which brings all nations together in the pursuit of higher education and sets new standards for aspiring artists. It is the only school of its kind in Canada, focusing on traditional First Nations Pacific Northwest Coast art. Art is showcased at the Skeena Salmon Arts Festival, a summer-long community collaboration event supported by many local groups.³⁷

Dawson Creek draws in crowds to its new event centre for large sporting events and concerts – everything from hockey games to major concerts with headlining acts.³⁸

Support Industries

Like virtually all economies, industry has a significant role in supporting communities and will likely continue to do so for some time.

Communities are looking to diversify industry activities by growing industrial parks, establishing secondary manufacturing, and localized supply chains and developing capital projects. They are also undertaking joint ventures, increasing equity in development and ownership, and establishing economic development, construction, logging and other contracting businesses to support industry activities.

“I think a lot of people picture it in their mind that we just shut everything off and the world will go on and change and there has to be a balance there. We have to do something in the midterm while we are trying to drop it.”

“Access to capital is important for equity participation in some of these projects. Not just contracting and employment but owning a portion of a major development.”

Terrace and **Kitselas First Nation** have a 50/50 joint agreement for the Skeena Industrial Development Park. Kitselas Development Corporation owns 172 acres of the 2,400-acre site, which is located near the Northwest Regional Airport, along Highway 37, between Terrace and Kitimat. The site is alluvial gravel, with excellent drainage and seismic stability, ideal for a broad range of industrial development.³⁹

Saulteau First Nation opened the North Wind Supplies industrial supply store in Chetwynd which sells a variety of tools and equipment and offers mechanical repairs of chainsaws and lawnmowers and other services.⁴⁰

Some communities have established their own natural resource development companies to manage their territories and negotiate agreements with industry on their terms. As previously stated, northern residents live with the consequences of irresponsible industrial development and want it to be done properly with local interests, values, priorities and employment in mind. Industry development and projects that benefit the environment can foster new employment opportunities and grow the population.



City of Prince George crews busy replacing vandalized and dead trees in the downtown core (Brent Braaten)

“The extra benefit of self-performing is that instead of the extra 2 to 5% on a joint venture – whatever our profit margin is, 20 to 30%, that is direct benefit to the Nation. On top of that, our companies run about 70% of the First Nation workforce at any given time. It is more profits back to the Nation and higher employment opportunities for the members.”

McLeod Lake Indian Band owns the Duz Cho Logging Limited Partnership – a well-established full phase harvesting and road construction contractor operating since 1988. Duz Cho Logging now harvests from 800,000 to one million cubic meters per year in the areas of McLeod Lake and Williston Lake Reservoir in North Central British Columbia including McLeod Lake Indian Band’s settlement lands.⁴¹

Supporting Community Vitality

Housing and Infrastructure Upgrades

It is common for northern communities to have infrastructure deficits. Many communities developed around the same time and their aging infrastructure and housing stock must now be replaced.

“I think we are going through what most communities in northern BC are. We are at that age where we are trying to replace a lot of really expensive infrastructure. We are trying our best to keep up. It is a real struggle though.”

Infrastructure is expensive and paying for it is difficult for communities that do not have industry contributions to their tax base. Homeowners end up paying through high property taxes, exacerbating existing challenges related to northern affordability. Housing improvements are needed but often rely on limited budgets from other levels of government

Infrastructure upgrades are important for communities and create an opportunity for construction work. Strong, healthy, attractive community infrastructure can support industry and other sectors as well. They can also help communities achieve more energy efficiency and carbon emissions reductions. To learn from the past, it is important infrastructure upgrades are made to last. They must be built with climate adaptation, demographic change, energy efficiency, accessibility and technology advancements in mind.

Fort St. John is in the process of constructing a net-zero municipal building through a partnership with the provincial and federal governments. The conceptual building design focused on three energy performance targets: net-zero energy, PHIUS+ (Passive House Institute US) and PHI Passivhaus (Passive House Institute, Germany).⁴²

Northern leaders identified infrastructure priorities like upgrading roads, water and sewer treatment and housing. Meanwhile, an adequate supply of housing is necessary to support new projects and development while energy efficiency renovations can support climate goals and reduce heating and cooling costs. Over the coming decades, green infrastructure like electric vehicle charging stations or recycling and composting facilities could create jobs and improve the lives of northerners. Connectivity infrastructure, including fibre optic internet or cell service in remote and rural areas, is also important to support and attract new and diverse businesses and residents.

“That is part of my vision as well, in the next five years I am hoping to be connected to fibre optic cable. I think that will give us an advantage for someone in the city, for example, that works remotely or is capable of working remotely. One visit here – it will be an easy sell.”

Esk’etemc completed construction of a new water treatment plant which provides clean drinking water to 118 homes, the community band office, school, fire hall, church and health centre. The system removed the boil water advisory that had been in place since 2004. The federal government invested \$5.17 million to support the community to complete the system.⁴³

Amenities and Municipal Services

Attracting and retaining residents is a key objective for many northern communities whose populations have fluctuated alongside periods of industry booms and busts. Communities need strong, healthy populations to maintain a steady tax base, ensure enough money is flowing through the community to support businesses and secure local workforce capacity to staff services and public institutions. Communities need a baseline population to support grocery stores, retail shops and restaurants. They need young families to help schools stay open. They need volunteers in the community to supplement service delivery. Growing local amenities, increasing community attractiveness and making communities more accessible and affordable can encourage newcomers and ensure people stay local.

“What the communities in northwest BC are asking for is some recognition that we have small populations and small tax bases but we're dealing with big city problems in terms of mental health and addictions and homelessness and housing affordability and availability – and we can't afford our infrastructure.”

Amenity improvements like establishing gathering spaces, community centres, seniors homes or recreation complexes make communities more attractive places to live. Improving amenities could also mean revitalizing main streets and downtowns, upgrading business façades and improving urban design and architecture. Improvements undertaken to support tourism and outdoor recreation like establishing more parks, conservation areas and trails can incentivize people to come to the area and improve locals’ health and wellness. Finally, installing sidewalk ramps or pedestrian and wheelchair walkways could make communities more accessible.

“Just walking along the trail is really good for your mental health. It is healing to be on the land and I see that as an opportunity economically. Whether that be cabins or longhouses for people to come and catch a fish.”

Houston installed geothermal energy to heat and cool its swimming pool and ice rink in 2012. Construction work created 6,000 hours of employment and maintaining year-round ice means another 1,000 hours of work year into the future. It saves the district \$30,000 per year in energy costs and generates \$10,000 worth of power to sell back to the grid.⁴⁴

Strong, well-funded municipal services are important to keep communities healthy and functioning properly. Improvements to municipal services and departments like fire stations, community halls and waste removal services are needed to support population growth. It is critical municipalities, First Nations and the rural areas surrounding them are equipped to provide fire services and snow removal to ensure people's safety and mobility. Improved waste diversion like recycling and composting programs can create jobs and reduce methane emissions. Community halls and libraries provide places for the public to gather and have rooms for meetings.

Northern Rockies Regional Municipality is the location of a vermicomposting pilot project which is estimated to cut landfill emissions by 2,273 tonnes. This project was funded by a joint local, provincial and federal government organics infrastructure program designed to divert waste away from landfills.⁴⁵

Many communities are too small to fund public transportation due to low ridership and limited municipal budgets. However, there are opportunities to improve active transportation opportunities like bike infrastructure and other ways to make it safe for people to get around town.

"If I had my crystal ball, I would have resourced fire departments out at McLeese Lake and Tye Lake, which then means I have fire protection for my entire electoral area from north to south. I would have community halls out at McLeese Lake, Tye Lake and Wildwood. Places that people can congregate together for events or community meetings. And a place where people can enjoy where they live and just enjoy life."

Strengthening the Care Economy

Northern communities rely on publicly funded government institutions like education, healthcare and local government offices. Some have had success by shifting to more services and care-oriented economies and have attracted retirement populations. That being said, often some services are still lacking and more supports are needed to help seniors age in place. Northern leaders repeatedly noted the need for strengthened health systems, including more primary care, medical professionals, home and social support services and emergency response. Health and happiness were seen as critical to community planning for wellness outcomes.

"Quality of life to me is defined by health and happiness. People come to a community that they feel is healthy, however they define health – whether it is personal health, population health, clean environment, access to clean water and infrastructure; or even health in terms of mental health, access to nature, lots of amenities, recreation, arts and culture."

Vanderhoof is presently working with Northern Health and the province to develop a primary care facility, as well as a three-storey complex with dementia care units and seniors housing.⁴⁶

Dawson Creek is home to the South Peace Health Services Society, a not-for-profit society dedicated to enhancing medical care in the region. It does so by concentrating its efforts on doctor and nursing retention. They also focus on providing affordable accommodations for patients receiving medical treatment in Dawson Creek, like the Bultreys Community House which provides health professionals and visiting patients with an affordable place to stay while in the community.⁴⁷

Communities also share some of the same social issues as larger cities. BC's opioid crisis has found its way to the North.

Recognizing job security is a key socio-economic determinant of health, leaders noted the correlation between resource sector volatility, industrial transitions such as mine and mill closures and an increase in mental health issues and other social challenges due to job loss and stress. Some northern leaders noted the need for more traditional healing and medicines to be used and culturally appropriate and sensitive services for Indigenous Peoples. Mental and emotional health and well-being are critically important alongside physical health. More treatment centres, healing centres, social workers and preventative social programs can benefit northern residents.

“We are trying to work with what we can do to help people struggling emotionally. Certainly drugs and opioids have attacked northern BC and our town has sadly really struggled lately. Since people are not in close proximity to one another, most people do drugs in their home alone and are not getting the help they need.”

“I am really big on healing because people operate through that level of awareness. And if you have significant trauma, you are operating through that on a daily basis. All of your interactions are rooted there. I work with a lot of different people and we need to address our wellness and trauma so we can actually listen to each other.”



Doctors in the 2010 University Hospital of Northern British Columbia Residence Program (David Mah)

Wet'suwet'en Hereditary Chiefs have established the Unist'ot'en Healing Centre which is a culturally safe healing program centered on the healing properties of the land. Constructed entirely from donated materials and volunteer labour, the building features a full kitchen, dining space, meeting rooms and lodging for elders and participants. Programming began in 2016 with the first Wet'suwet'en Youth Art Camp and has expanded to include treatment for addictions, women's groups, cultural workshops and language schools.⁴⁸

Education and Workforce Development

As traditional resource industries continue to grow, decline and transform, the workforce necessary to support these activities will look different and workers will need to learn and adapt to take advantage of new opportunities. For example, the interior forest sector has become more automated and capital-intensive while employment levels in forest sector facilities have significantly declined. New jobs in the resource sector often require education or new skill sets when compared to past decades. New industries and diversified economies need different kinds of workers as well. Some northern leaders described how their communities simultaneously experienced noticeable unemployment and labour shortages as local populations did not have the kind of workers needed for projects. This often meant companies brought in workers from other parts of BC, Canada and the world.

For revitalized northern economies to thrive, they need residents with the skills, experience, training and credentials to enable local activities, development, businesses and public services. Building capacity to ensure local workers can participate in the jobs of the future will position communities for success. Labour market analysis suggests "green jobs" in transportation and construction will become more available as the economy transitions to account for climate change. Building new transit lines, retrofitting buildings, construction related to climate adaptation and mine and oil well remediation jobs could provide displaced resource sector workers with new opportunities.⁴⁹ These jobs would ideally be directly located in northern communities and offer comparable wages to traditional resource sector jobs that can support families.

Keeping professionals like doctors, teachers and tradespeople in communities is imperative. Northern leaders noted the role strengthened education systems, safety training courses, trades and professional schools and satellite campuses could have in bolstering the economy. Evidence suggests individuals are more likely to remain in the communities they are trained in. Similarly, job placement services could help workers get connected to job or training opportunities in line with their skillsets and interests.

"If the provincial government is going to approve projects like LNG Canada, which is estimated to bring \$24 billion into the provincial coffers over its operating lifespan, if the communities aren't in a position to support the workers of those plants including supporting their families, that's not a win-win scenario."



Post-secondary students in electrical competition at the College of New Caledonia (Brent Braaten)

Nisga'a Lisims Government has supported community members to receive training for job opportunities with LNG Canada through the British Columbia Aboriginal Mine Training Association (BCAMTA)'s first Heavy Equipment Operator Training Program. The BCAMTA and Northwest Community College worked together to ensure candidates had access to the support and services to successfully complete the program, including access to housing in New Aiyansh and Terrace.⁵⁰

Doig River First Nation has taken jurisdiction over employment and training responsibilities from the federal government and are working with members of the community to establish a comprehensive skills and job placement strategy. They are working with the local college and school district to develop strategies for local high school students to transition to college and hold career fairs.⁵¹

Collaborating, Building and Rebuilding Relationships

Reconciliation and Decolonization

Both Indigenous and settler community leaders in the North expressed a desire to understand one another better and achieve reconciliation. Some leaders noted the need for clarity around what UNDRIP and DRIPA will mean for development in the North and how relationships will be affected. They want to know how to move forward together.

Northern leaders pointed to several initiatives where they believed the objectives of reconciliation could be forwarded. The following initiatives appear promising based on the broad support voiced by the individuals we spoke with.

"Everybody talks about implementing UNDRIP in their mandate letter. We recognize that Indigenous people have a right to preservation of lands, resources and water. They'll be talking like that for another 10 years I suspect, if you don't make a significant political commitment to do it. Why would we sit at the table for another decade?"

Land

Returning tracts of so-called "Crown land" to Indigenous Peoples is one of the most productive ways to derive meaningful benefits for their communities. Indigenous Nations expressed a need to be stewards and managers of their land and determine for themselves whether they want to continue traditional uses of their territory, find new economic opportunities with it, or combine these priorities.

"It's really about the recognition – about Indigenous traditional people who have title and rights and how to restore the recognition of the geographic extent of the territory."

Doig River First Nation is one of five Treaty 8 First Nations who are recipients of the Treaty Land Entitlement process designed to return land owed to them from historically flawed reserve allocations. Doig is planning to establish cultural camps and cabins on the outskirts of Fort St. John and set up an urban reserve within the city that features housing and retail developments.⁵²



BC passing Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples Act into law (Don Craig)

Resources

For Indigenous people to exercise their sovereignty, their cultural survival must be assured. Healing from the trauma of colonization, revitalizing languages and traditions and growing self-determination are all priorities that can only be advanced with the support of restititional funding from colonial governments.

“A big goal for me with becoming economically independent is investing in housing and programs to try and bring back culture and language. Cultural revitalization comes after you are economically dependent and stable and can comfortably focus your time and efforts on that.”

Carrier Sekani Tribal Council finalized negotiations with the province in 2020 for a Pathways 2.0 Agreement, which includes \$175 million for economic development, cultural revitalization, sovereignty and other activities. This initiative is meant to work toward a long-term comprehensive reconciliation agreement across several issues.⁵³

Governance

Many Indigenous governance structures predate British Columbia and remain intact. Recognizing traditional means of decision-making and responsibility to the land can be a powerful way to restore what was lost. Indigenous Nations must be allowed to determine their own methods of governance and accountability.

“It starts with the Indian Act and residential schools and having the decision-making taken away from the First Nations. When that decision-making was taken away and rights to live on the land and practicing our responsibilities as caretakers of the land, when all of that was taken away there was a breakdown in our governance and decision-making.”

Gitanyow Hereditary Chiefs established the Gitanyow Huwilp Recognition and Reconciliation Agreement which enacts shared decision-making on lands and natural resources in Gitanyow Lax'yip. This includes detailed land use planning and promotes economic opportunities for Gitanyow including forest tenures, alternative energy, carbon offsets, tourism and non-timber activities.⁵⁴

Collaborating Between Governments

Northern leaders expressed a desire to work together on mutual objectives and to their mutual benefit.

Structural challenges impede cohesion between Indigenous and settler communities. Local governments are often working with the province while the federal government is responsible for First Nations reserves. As many First Nations lack the capacity and resources for their own services, they share services offered in nearby local communities. Since natural disasters do not recognize jurisdictional boundaries, communities have often come together to prevent and address extreme weather events such as forest fires and floods.

“You need to try out something that is jointly done. Not only between the government and Indigenous people but you have to ensure you involve the non-Indigenous people that enjoy the area. You need to do that – they have rights, they love it, they can add to the solution.”

Nadleh Whut’en First Nation, Stelat’en First Nation, and Fraser Lake invested in a Sprinkler Protection Unit to protect the three adjacent communities from wildfires and have trained 26 emergency responders and area residents to form crews to use the system. The trailer and crews will also be available for the BC Forest Service to use outside of the immediate area.⁵⁵

While this may work in some instances and provide opportunities for collaboration, First Nations also often want the opportunity to exercise autonomy in providing their own services, staffed by their members, directly in their communities. Settler communities also noted how there were opportunities to learn from Indigenous Nations regarding caring for the environment, respecting elders and emphasizing community.

“It has always been that the province is holding the pen, the federal government is holding the pen and they are working with the First Nations – rather it should be the other way around. When the First Nations are the one with the ink and the province and federal government fall in line. That is the only time you will have true trust between communities and First Nations groups.”



Flooded Wilkins Park on Otway Road
Prince George (David Mah)

Moving Forward

The provincial government has an important role to play in supporting northern communities to achieve the vision they have for the future of the North. Opportunities outlined in the previous section show northerners want diversified, healthier, stronger communities, new businesses and better relationships. Provincial support, however, will be a vital contribution to their success.

What northern leaders want from the province is relatively simple: more money and decision-making power to determine their futures. However, we recognize existing structures and institutions make this much more complex and it requires structural change, new ways of thinking and a shift in the status quo. This section outlines options the provincial government could consider in changing how it works with northern communities to make sure they can move forward on their terms while also progressing larger-scale priorities like climate action and reconciliation. Equipping communities with the resources, capacity, policy and program supports and decision-making power to realize their vision and strengthen local autonomy can help the province achieve its objectives.

Resources and Capacity

Most northern communities do not have the resources available to them that larger communities in the south have. Northern leaders were adamant that before any major progress can be made on climate or reconciliation, they need to “even the playing field.” Northern communities must be able to offer services to meet fundamental needs and ensure communities are affordable, cohesive and provide a good quality of life for residents. At a minimum, communities need basic services like doctors’ offices, schools, grocery stores, pharmacies, seniors’ homes, shelters, safe roads, clean drinking water and emergency response systems. These basic services will set the foundation for pursuing more ambitious goals. While many northern communities are more than capable of offering residents all of these services, they need extra capacity to pursue larger objectives without overexerting municipal staff and funding. Meeting basic standards to provide a good quality of life should not completely drain communities of their resources.

For proactive, forward-thinking, long-term planning to be an option for northern communities, the province must think critically about how resources are distributed and responsibilities are delegated. The following section lists some options the provincial government could consider based on the concerns and demands of northern leaders. Prior to implementation, these options must first undergo a thorough economic study and analysis to determine feasibility.

Meeting Basic Community Needs

Simply put, northern leaders want more funding at their disposal to meet their obligations to their residents. Municipal governments in BC are responsible for essential services – clean water, garbage collection, sewer systems, roads and sidewalks, streetlights, fire and police protection, libraries, parks and recreational facilities, policies and land use planning.⁵⁶ Local governments want to be able to deliver municipal services without exacerbating rural poverty. It is not fair to put the burden of industrial collapse on residents who make up for lost municipal tax revenues through increased property taxes.

It is not enough for the province to run “funding competitions” to see which community can best demonstrate the financial need for resources with already strained capacity. Provincial leaders could consider transfers to municipal governments whose tax bases have suffered after a major industry player packs up and leaves town, particularly to address the added challenges municipal governments face with ageing infrastructure. Northern Indigenous and settler communities do not want to turn into ghost towns and have the right to continue to enjoy living in the places they call home.

“You want to make sure you have the capacity in the long-term to continue to be able to provide services that are valued by your residents. And you’ve got to be able to find a model that fiscally works for your residents. You can’t tax them out of their homes.”

“We were here at the beginning, we’re here now and we’re going to be here at the end. We’re not going anywhere. We can’t just pick up our community and move to Arizona. We’re going to be here till the end of days. That’s part of why First Nations people are so always so adamant about the land. We are stewards of the land, so we have to protect our territory as best we can with what we have.”

Transfers from one level of government to another are not a new concept. The federal government provides equalization payments to ensure that provincial governments have sufficient revenues to provide reasonably comparable levels of public services at reasonably comparable levels of taxation.⁵⁷

When the community of Tumbler Ridge was on the brink of collapse after the announcement of the early closure of the Quintette coal mine, town leaders came together. They created a Revitalization Task Force to stabilize the community and find a way to continue to deliver municipal services with support of the regional, provincial and federal governments.⁵⁸

Better Grants and Direct Funding

There are challenges with how funding opportunities for local governments are presently structured when it comes to more complex issues like climate change, health care and housing. Grants available to municipalities and First Nations to address these issues are often inflexible and overly strict. They also sometimes pit rural and northern communities against larger municipalities with more grant application capacity, staff and resources to implement projects.

Granting programs could be improved by ensuring they meet broader provincial objectives and are also sensitive to local circumstances. For example, suppose the government's broad objective is to achieve cleaner transportation. In that case, they must consider some communities may be able to install EV charging stations through an available grant, but this does not address the fact that local dealerships do not sell EVs and there are no local mechanics to maintain them.

Creative, flexible solutions and parameters are needed. Northern leaders should be given the flexibility to use grants in ways that make sense for the community while meeting broader goals.

To address the unique challenges and opportunities in rural, northern environments, specific grant programs set aside specifically for northern, rural communities could support them to achieve their objectives. Past programs like the Rural Dividend Fund were designed specifically to support rural communities and had built-in flexibility to accommodate and directly support local priorities. A streamlined application process also allowed communities to apply with ease.

“When the local government doesn’t have enough time to submit those things, that is always a problem. Always more time. Creating more resources available to have shovel ready projects ready to go when grants become available. Especially for small communities who don’t have engineers on staff and all these things ready to go.”

“I think it is important for urbanites to realize that in small communities you are not going to have a lot of dealerships. In our community, it is important for those dealers to start getting EV certified; it is also important for independent mechanics to know how to work on these vehicles.”

“The gas tax is a great model. I know what I can spend it on and I can make the decision here of what my community is going to look like. And I know what my community wants.”

The Rural Dividend Fund provided up to \$25 million a year to assist rural communities, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous, with a population of 25,000 or less to strengthen and diversify their local economies. It was developed to recognize both the contribution rural communities have made to BC’s economy and the unique challenges they face to diversify beyond natural resources. This program has been suspended to allocate funding to support workers and communities impacted by the 2019 interior forest sector downturn.⁵⁹

Considering the range in size of towns, villages, rural areas, regional districts, cities and First Nations, these grants could be run and awarded in pools based on comparable population size and other demographics. This would ensure they are fairly targeted and awarded more evenly across regions.

“The province gives out grants here and there, but when the big municipalities have big pet projects, the smaller regional districts almost instantly get shut out. By the time you're done funding projects in Vancouver, Victoria, Kelowna, Kamloops and Prince George, there's no money left.”

Similarly, the provincial government could consider specific “carve-outs” in existing funding programs that set aside a certain amount of funding specifically for a subset of applicants, such as northern communities. For example, the federal Low-Carbon Economy Challenge Fund launched two separate funding streams that allowed different pools of applicants to compete for funding on a fairer basis.

The Low-Carbon Economy Challenge Fund was divided into a “partnerships” stream for smaller Indigenous communities and organizations, small and medium-sized businesses, not-for-profit organizations and small municipalities. It also included a “champions” stream open to groups with more capacity, including provinces and territories, municipalities and large businesses.⁶⁰

Northern leaders passionately believe direct funding would be the most immediate and efficient way to support them taking more ambitious action on climate change, reconciliation, and creative economic diversification and transition solutions. Rather than spending effort and staff time applying for grants, putting added pressure on already strained local government workers, direct funding could be provided to local governments to undertake economic benefit analysis, case studies and feasibility studies for new initiatives and projects. Easy and predictable access to resources helps communities better prioritize, allocate and implement initiatives. Cutting out the provincial “middle person” could help community leaders be more responsive to local economic priorities and objectives that protect the environment, Indigenous and community interests.

“Funding. You can't do research and you can't hire people or bring them together without the funding. And easy access to it. There should be a hub where the collection of all these projects and funding pots are available – provincially and federally. And the expertise. And not so cumbersome to get the dollars. Not just one year. These have to be multi-year funding agreements and partnerships.”

Resource Revenue Sharing

As northerners live in and around major development projects and the environmental and social consequences of that development, they find it deeply unjust benefits are not adequately recirculated back into their communities.

While residents may benefit from the high salaries of resource sector jobs, they are often left alone to deal with the consequences of boom and bust cycles and their communities suffer as a result, forcing people to leave. Revenue sharing agreements are widely supported and make sense for northern communities who could better support themselves if given more access to the money generated directly in their regions.

“Most of northern BC is resource development and most of that money goes to the south. We hold up the rest of the province in the North with the money that comes from resource development, pipeline jobs, mining jobs, whatever. That money flows.”

The Fair Share Agreement was negotiated in the 1990s and early 2000s between the province and eight local governments in the Peace Region. It provided infrastructure funding to account for lack of local tax revenue from industrial activity outside municipalities. It has since been replaced by the Peace River Agreement which does not scale with the growth of the gas industry, caps funding contributions, places limits on how communities can use the money and can be unilaterally cancelled by the province.^{61,62}

Some communities who benefit from the Peace River Agreement use it exclusively for capital projects to improve the community and upgrade infrastructure to sustainably fund municipal services through their property tax base. Groups like the Northwest Resource Benefits Alliance see the benefits of this structure and have been advocating for a similar one.

“We’re doing the best that we can to try to mitigate some of the shocks. One of the things we do consciously is we embark on heavier capital investment during periods of time when there’s less economic activity. Our pricing is often better, it stabilizes the community because people can work in the construction industry. That tends to stabilize the economy and essentially allows full employment.”

The Northwest Resource Benefits Alliance was formed in 2014 and is made up of 21 local governments across northwestern British Columbia with the goal of negotiating local benefits from major projects. This resulted in a \$100 million Northern Capital and Planning Grant in 2019.⁶³

Details of these agreements matter. Northern communities must maintain their vitality and they deserve a good quality of life regardless of whether new developments are taking place. Impact Benefit Agreements only get communities so far and only apply to major projects. Northern leaders want more financial equity in projects. They want to be partners through joint ventures alongside industry, creating the opportunity to undertake resource development in a way that is more in line with local values.

Structural Change

Policy and Program Adjustments

In addition to changes in funding structures, simple policy and program adjustments can be built into provincial initiatives to make them more accommodating and accessible to the unique circumstances in northern communities. Northern leaders want more time to submit funding applications due to the strained capacity in local government and economic development offices. They have asked for more timely communication about what kind of project and funding opportunities are “in the pipeline.” Better yet, grants that specifically support increasing municipal capacity could mitigate this issue altogether. Capacity-building programs such as those offered by Northern Development Initiative Trust could be expanded or replicated by the provincial government.

“Making sure communities have the capacity to have shovel-ready projects ready to go for these things that are coming up in the future is really important. And that could be by way of Union of BC Municipalities grants to make sure that you have a project manager and an understanding of what is coming up in the pipeline.”

Northern Development Initiative Trust (NDIT) is an independent, non-profit corporation established through provincial legislation. It offers a range of funding programs suited to a diverse set of economic development priorities in central and northern British Columbia to identify and pursue new opportunities for stimulating economic growth and job creation within the region. One funding area includes programs that are designed to strengthen local government capacity, such as the Economic Development Capacity Building program, First Nations Government Internship program, Grant Writing Support program and Local Government Internship program.⁶⁴

There are opportunities for the province to better recognize and reward the innovation demonstrated in northern communities and support them in taking initiative to find creative solutions to local problems. For example, vermicomposting facilities were not originally eligible for provincial funding meant to help divert land waste. However, the provincial government provided Fort Nelson with a letter of intent to support this project once they realized the success it could bring to the community. This allowed project planning to proceed on schedule and ultimately facilitated a successful project.

“We did some trials with vermicomposting over the last three years and were very successful with a small scale approach. And we went to a larger scale. We applied for the grant, but our process wasn’t recognized as an official type of composting because no one had done it before – we were breaking new ground. That is an example where the province supported us because they literally sent us a letter of intent saying ‘we intend to give you grant funds, but we can’t do it until we change the language in the regulation and are working through the process to do it.’ That is a very good example of how the province worked with us as a local government to bridge the gap to customize the process.”

Decision Making and Engagement

Northern leaders expressed a desire to be consulted earlier, more regularly and more meaningfully. Indigenous Peoples have inherent, treaty and constitutional rights to be involved in decisions on their territory. Still, they are often required to expend valuable time and resources proving their rights in courts. First Nations want to be treated as partners and consulted through a government-to-government approach, with their rights, title, laws and governance systems honoured and respected. For Indigenous communities, we heard it is important the government expedites DRIPA implementation at “the speed of business” and show that it is making progress on its commitments. Clarity around the requirement for free, prior and informed consent will help Indigenous Peoples exercise their decision-making authority and give their neighbours a framework to engage with it.

“Continue along the path of consultation and collaboration and reconciliation in a true and honest manner. And treat us as equals, not as inferiors. To me, it is respect. A good reconciliation collaboration relationship is centred around mutual respect.”

A “northern compatibility” lens that mirrors the Gender-Based Analysis Plus government decision-making framework could help policy analysts think critically about the relevance of policy decisions in a northern context.

Gender-Based Analysis Plus (GBA+) is an analytical tool used to ensure government policies, programs and services work for all British Columbians. It informs all stages of the development, implementation and evaluation processes, including issue identification, research and analysis, consultation, options development and decision-making.⁶⁵

Internal provincial government capacity to lend insight into the reality of decisions could help improve political palatability and result in stronger policies and strengthened relationships with northern groups. Officials in liaison roles can help governments understand the nuanced conundrums northerners experience.

“We built an \$80 million recreation facility and we didn’t end up using LEED construction, for example. We couldn’t afford it. The interesting thing – to get the product here that would have been needed to get the facility LEED requirements would have actually outweighed what we would have saved from carbon offsets given where the construction workers and materials had to come from. It just was not cost-effective.”



Stellat'en First Nation, Nadleh Whut'en First Nation and the Village of Fraser Lake mark Indigenous Peoples Day on June 21, 2021. The three communities formed a permanent tri-council to promote collaboration on local issues in 2016 (Sarra Storey)

Northern leaders expressed frustration with how change and progress can stagnate with four-year provincial electoral cycles when ministry mandates shift and priorities change. Some noted how senior government bureaucrats could also stifle progress.

Some northern leaders insisted the government must shift its mindset. This may involve removing inflexible, problematic and closed-minded senior bureaucrats with outdated views. These individuals can get in the way of radical shifts and meaningful change. Bureaucracy requires a certain degree of recalibration to move forward.

"I think there is still a lot of systemic racism in the bureaucracy. I see it. And I recognize there are some really good people there. But this whole attitude that we can't let go or try new things is frustrating. And the province really needs a change in thinking."

"I personally think they should clean house in some of these land ministries and get some new bodies in there to look at things. It doesn't matter who the politicians are who are elected, the high-level bureaucrats are the same and nothing ever changes."

Governance and Collaboration

To address challenges around collaboration, the provincial government can help bring groups together; however, northern leaders were adamant that it was **not** the government's place to step in and control the discussion. This can be seen as paternalistic and can get in the way of progress.

Grants to support community meetings and dialogues with or without facilitation by a neutral, informed, third-party facilitator could help identify common goals, overcome challenges, brainstorm solutions and implement pathways forward.

In some cases, the first step is addressing historic wrongs between communities and conflict within communities. Disagreements, discrimination, racism, land disputes, governance challenges and polarizing opinions on controversial developments are all underlying these discussions.

Northern leaders also noted it is critical the right individuals be brought to the table. This means including representatives from the five regional districts in the North and using existing platforms for engagement and collaboration such as the North Central Local Government Association and the First Nations Leadership Council. The potential for regional districts to play a greater role in administering programs and funding by leveraging the capacity and assets of entire regions, rather than single communities, could be further explored.

"Well, first of all, no offence to the provincial government, but they need to get out of the way."

"I think it's really important to structure the conversation in a way that, if there's any interest in having a dialogue, that it's not perceived to be an imposition of the will of people who have very little insight into the way of life in the region. People do become defensive very quickly about the way of life up here and their economic, environmental and cultural record."

"When I learned the real history of Indigenous people in Canada – I thought – wow, you know? There are some people that are always going to be jerks, but I feel like most people – if they just heard these stories – would get it. Just getting people in a room to tell each other their stories can be used really successfully."



Destiny Louie is the Tri-Community Youth Ambassador of 2021 for Nadleh Whut'en First Nation, Stellat'en First Nation, and Fraser Lake (Sarrah Storey)

Governments can be more involved in supporting local capacity and serving as a conduit between northern places and decision-making centres like Victoria. The COVID-19 pandemic has helped people connect online more than ever before; however, in-person contact and immersive exposure to northern issues are not fully replicated through technology like Zoom, Google Meet and Skype. Provincial leaders can foster closer relationships between communities and the provincial government through staffing up regional offices, hiring community liaisons and establishing other ways to formalize community-province connections and work toward decentralizing government. Forums such as the Northeast Roundtable are a positive step towards strengthened relationships between local and provincial governments. Northern leaders emphasized process for the sake of process was not useful – and meaningful action must be the outcome.

“Things happen because the right people are in the right place at the right time.”

“There has to be some sort of provision for small centres to have a degree of control, which no longer or doesn't exist, period. So that is an extremely important piece – it speaks to a degree of decentralization.”

The Northeast Roundtable is a forum for communication and engagement between the province, First Nations, and local governments in the Northeast. The Roundtable supports discussions related to provincial and regional land and resource initiatives and helps the provincial government more directly identify community, rightsholder and stakeholder interests.⁶⁶

Conclusion



Bighorn sheep, near northern Rockies (John E. Marriott)

Northern communities can thrive individually and collectively by growing and diversifying economies, supporting community vitality and collaborating, building and rebuilding relationships. Economic, environmental, social and cultural change is inevitable, unavoidable and coming fast — but local leaders see the opportunities lying in wait for their members and residents. They must be prepared and equipped not only to take advantage of these opportunities but also to meet the challenges ahead. The future is bright for the North, however, Indigenous and settler communities alike urgently need support to realize their ambitions.

Provincial policy goals around climate change and reconciliation depend on thriving northern communities. After decades of funding its hospitals, schools and public transit with resource revenues from northern British Columbia, the province must repay these debts to ensure the long-term prosperity of the region. Critically, Indigenous rights and title must be at the centre of these efforts as the province implements DRIPA.

At the same time, northerners had strong words for provincial initiatives they saw as patronizing, unfair, overly prescriptive or ignorant of their unique needs and circumstances. It's time for British Columbia to stop using the North as its resource colony and invest in building strong communities across the region. The province must change the way it distributes resources, support local capacity and share decision-making authority. New strategies and approaches are necessary that value local knowledge, support local priorities and look after workers.

Understanding one another is the first step toward progress. While this report summarizes some of the main themes raised in discussions about the future with northern leaders, each topic area described in the preceding sections is complex, nuanced, overlapping and has a high degree of variability between different communities and regions. Northern communities face intertwined economic, environmental, social and cultural challenges so there's a need for coordinated strategic planning across all relevant policy areas.

We hope this report sparks a broader, deeper discussion about how to achieve northern vitality, address climate change, support Indigenous sovereignty and foster more cohesion in the North and across British Columbia. It is clear from the conversations that informed this report this must involve direct engagement with northern leaders and communities themselves. The Wilderness Committee plans to encourage this dialogue, engage the province and invite its allies to do the same.

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