

Indigenous Leadership: Governance and Development Project

Case Study

FHQ Developments

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One of the key actions in Saskatchewan's Growth Plan 2020-2030 is to grow Indigenous participation in the economy. The success of this action depends on Indigenous nations in Saskatchewan building and maintaining their economic development activities. The Indigenous Leadership: Governance and Development project provides made-in-Saskatchewan tools for Indigenous communities to build the governance foundation that will support long-term economic development. An important part of the project involves capturing the experience of Saskatchewan Indigenous communities through case studies and toolkits based on this experience.

The case study in this document was developed by a team of researchers and their affiliates at the Johnson Shoyama Graduate School of Public Policy at the University of Saskatchewan. The project is funded by the Government of Saskatchewan's Ministry of Trade and Export Development.

The case studies are designed to be used first and foremost by Indigenous communities across Saskatchewan. The premise of the work is that economic development stories need to be shared among those involved in economic development, both in the community where the economic development activities take place and in other communities looking to undertake economic development. It is important to focus on what has and has not worked. One of the long-term goals is to develop a set of resources that is Indigenous-led and available to Indigenous communities across the province and the country. The cases may also be used as governance training components and/or strategic planning exercises, as well as in teaching.

The case studies combine material from websites and other publicly available sources with material gathered through interviews with leaders and representatives involved in economic development activities. The interviews last between two and four hours and involve a small group of economic development leaders in the community. The questions asked focus solely on the corporate entities and activities that have been developed, and those interviewed are asked questions in their role as a corporate leader.

When approaching community leaders and representatives, we begin with an informal discussion. If the leaders and representatives indicate an interest in participating, we proceed with sending them a formal letter of introduction, which they can use to obtain official permission to proceed. We know communities receive many requests for information, and they do not always see the results of the work that is undertaken. Our goal is to ensure that the case study is shared with the community in a way that is beneficial. To this end, a draft of the case study is shared with the community, and the case study is not finalized until the community gives its agreement. Once a set of case studies have been developed, leaders from the communities involved will be given the opportunity to discuss the findings.

We would like to thank the leaders and representatives for their time and effort. Their knowledge and insights are critical to understanding economic development in Indigenous communities.

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File Hills Qu'Appelle Tribal Council (FHQTC)

Advancing the Indigenous economy in Treaty Four, and beyond

Overview and Key Learnings

This case study profiles FHQ Developments' approach to economic development, highlighting key strengths, successes, and community outcomes.

FHQ Developments is one of several for-profit entities owned by File Hills Qu'Appelle Tribal Council (FHQTC). FHQTC also owns and governs several non-profit organizations that combine Indigenous ways of being and doing with Western mainstream approaches to deliver important services to Indigenous and non-Indigenous citizens of the region.

FHQ Developments' model and approach to development is based on four key features:

- (1) restricted dividends;
- (2) an active governance role;
- (3) a shift from contract-based models to sustainable limited partnerships and majority-ownership positions; and
- (4) investment in the Indigenous economy as a whole.

These features are reflected in the following actions and outcomes:

- FHQ Developments limits the dividends it pays to FHQTC's Member Nations to ensure it is able to weather economic downturns and has the capital needed to pursue growth and diversification opportunities;
- The company's focus on the professional development of its executives and directors has increased partner and investor confidence and enabled the organization to mitigate risk by insulating business from shifts in political leadership;
- Combined with this focus on leadership development, FHQ Developments has moved to reduce its involvement with single-purpose joint ventures or service agreements in favour of limited partnership structures in which FHQ Developments has a majority interest and assumes a management role; and
- FHQ Developments seeks out partners that value the strengths of Indigenous business and share a genuine commitment to increasing Indigenous participation in the economy.

These actions and outcomes reflect FHQ Developments' three pillars: (1) Investments & Partnership: generating revenue and employment opportunities for its shareholders; (2) Economic Development: developing an understanding of the benefits of Indigenous approaches to partnership and investment; and (3) Human Resources: building Indigenous human capacity.

The case begins with background material on FHQTC, including its governance structure. The case then outlines FHQTC's profit and non-profit organizations before focusing on the structure and accomplishments of FHQ Developments.

Background and History

The File Hills Qu'Appelle Tribal Council (FHQTC) includes Member Nations of the Qu'Appelle and File Hills Agencies (see Table 1 for a list of the Nations). FHQTC delivers programs and services to and develops opportunities on behalf of more than 16,000 citizens of its 11 Member Nations.

FHQTC was formed in 1999 when the Touchwood File Hills Qu'Appelle District Chiefs Council was reorganized into two separate organizations: the Touchwood Agency Tribal Council and the File Hills Qu'Appelle Tribal Council. Touchwood File Hills Qu'Appelle District Chiefs Council was founded in 1983 as a non-profit organization to represent 16 regional First Nations in Treaty Four territory, Saskatchewan.

Table 1. Member Nations of File Hills Qu'Appelle Tribal Council

Member Nations	
Carry-The-Kettle Nakoda Nation	Peepeekisis Cree Nation
Little Black Bear's Band of Cree & Assiniboine Nations	Piapot First Nation
Muscowpetung Saulteaux Nation	Standing Buffalo Dakota Nation
Nekaneet Cree Nation	Star Blanket Cree Nation
Okanese First Nation	Wood Mountain Lakota Nation
Pasqua First Nation	

Source: Government of Canada (2021).

FHQTC Governance

FHQTC decisions are made by the Chiefs Forum, which includes the elected Chiefs of the 11 Member Nations, and an elected FHQTC Tribal Chief. While a majority vote is formally required to reach decisions, the organization strives for consensus. Elders (Life Speakers), Medicine People, and Youth and Women's Councils play essential advisory roles. Figure 1 provides a pictorial representation of FHTQC governance.

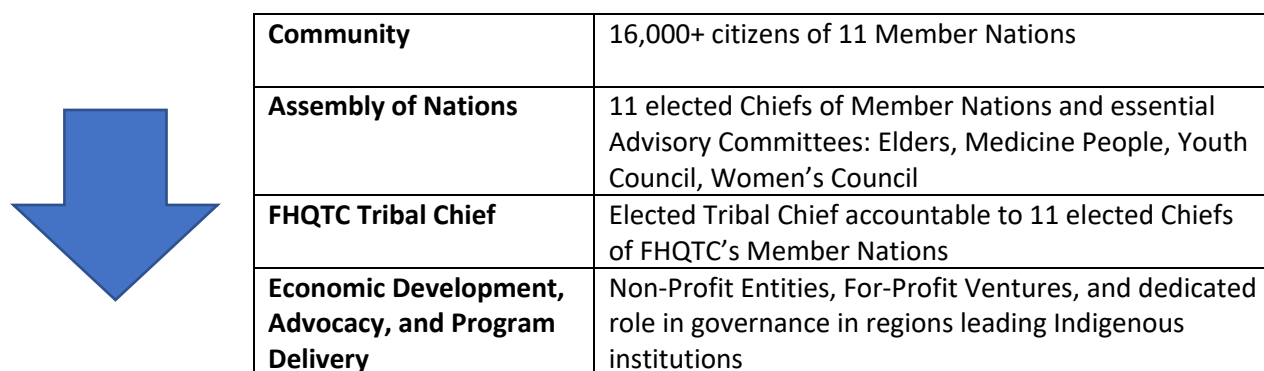


Figure 1. FHQTC Governance

FHQTC follows a nation-building governance model that blends principles of the Centre for First Nations Governance and the Harvard Project on American Indian Economic Development. The Council prioritizes strong governance. The majority of its Member Nation Chiefs have achieved the Pro.Dir designation and have served on the boards of FHQTC's non-profit entities and for-profit ventures.

FHQTC leaders also play active roles on the boards of some of Saskatchewan's and Canada's most important Indigenous institutions, including the First Nations University of Canada, First Nations Bank of Canada, Saskatchewan Indigenous Gaming Authority, and Federation of Sovereign Indigenous Nations. These institutions protect and advance Indigenous culture, influence policy and education, advocate for rights and justice, and serve as drivers of the Indigenous economy. The involvement of FHQTC leaders in these organizations ensures FHQTC representation at these tables, while also enhancing the governance, stewardship, and strategic direction of these organizations.

FHQTC has developed a set of non-profit entities and for-profit ventures over the years to meet the needs of its citizens and the people in the surrounding area.

Non-Profit Institutions

Since the 1980s, FHQTC leaders have built strong service institutions that merge Indigenous ways of being and doing with Western mainstream approaches. A list of these non-profit entities is presented in Table 2.

FHQTC-governed institutions have earned national recognition for innovative program and service delivery. All Nations Healing Hospital provides safe and uniquely holistic health services to Indigenous and non-Indigenous residents of the region. Leading Thunderbird Lodge, a nationally accredited 15-bed residential youth treatment facility, is considered a model of excellence for facilities across Canada. Its curriculum has been recognized by the Province of Saskatchewan's Ministry of Education for its integration of cultural teachings and practices. Pasikow Muskwa Healing Centre is home to six dialysis units and additional renal care facilities, the only Indigenous-owned centre in Saskatchewan. The culturally enhanced chronic kidney centre's care teams include a traditional Knowledge Keeper who plays an active role in treatment.¹

For-Profit Ventures

FHQTC has become a leader in Indigenous economic development through the activities of three for-profit entities: FHQ eCommerce, Kesechiwan Holdings, and FHQ Developments. FHQ eCommerce pursues opportunities in the electronic commerce sector and is currently seeking a banking license to capitalize on the organization's history and success in highly regulated sectors like banking and gaming. Kesechiwan Holdings manages business related to FHQTC's casino activities, including Living Sky Casino in Swift Current. FHQ Developments, FHQTC's investment and economic development corporation, is dedicated to increasing meaningful, Indigenous economic participation. Table 2 provides a list of FHQTC's non-profit and for-profit ventures. Table 3 provides detail on FHQ Developments' businesses.

Table 2. FHQTC Entities and Ventures

FHQTC Non-Profit Entities	FHQTC For-Profit Ventures		
	FHQ eCommerce	Keseechiwan Holdings	FHQ Developments
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Silver Sage Housing • Leading Thunderbird Lodge • Regina Treaty/Status Indian Services • All Nations Healing Hospital • White Raven Healing Centre • TFHQ Safe Shelters • Pasikow Muskwa Healing Centre 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pursues electronic commerce sector opportunities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • FHQ Casino Holdings LP • Living Sky Casino 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Great Plains Contracting • Ensign Energy Services • d3H Hotels Swift Current • Topa Contracting • Badger Daylighting • Plato Sask Testing • Pathway Supplies • Stone & Arrow Consulting • NuWind Energy • Tokata HR Solutions • Mammoet

Table 3. FHQ Developments Business Ventures

Venture	Ownership (%)	Established	Activity/Partner
Great Plains Contracting	51	2010	General construction services for mining and industry
Ensign Energy Services	50	2012	Mobile drilling rig operated in partnership with Crescent Point Drilling
d3h Hotels Swift Current	24	2012	d3h Hotels
Topa Contracting	51	2018	Project-based general contracting in partnership with Noble Construction
Badger Daylighting	50	2018	Operates custom hydrovac trucks throughout North America
Plato Sask Testing	80	2019	Partnership with national software testing services provider to train and develop Indigenous software testers for long-term technology careers. Canada's first Indigenous-owned software testing company ²
Pathway Supply	51	2020	Partnership with NorthStar Capital that provides a range of products (e.g., PPE, consumables, tooling, janitorial supplies)
Stone & Arrow Consulting	51	2021	Partnership with Stantec Consulting Ltd. focused on Indigenous inclusion in engineering and design.
NuWind Energy	100		Explores clean energy project opportunities in partnership with BluEarth Renewables
Mammoet			Partnership with international heavy lifting and transport company involving a stake in the operations of a Mammoet crane unit ³

Structure and Approach

FHQ Developments began its endeavours with the establishment of Great Plains Contracting in 2010, a joint venture with Points Athabasca, a respected Indigenous contractor with an extensive history in mining-related services, and Graham Construction, one of Canada's largest integrated construction companies.⁴ Since then, FHQ Developments has significantly diversified its investment portfolio to involve holdings in multiple sectors, including clean energy, industrial supply, technology, and oil and gas.

Three Pillars Model

FHQ Developments has earned a reputation for its successful approach to partnership, strong management and governance practices, and a unique three-pillar Indigenous economic development model.⁵

The first pillar of the FHQ Developments model – investments – follows a standard economic development strategy built around the pursuit of sustainable investments and partnerships to generate revenue and employment opportunities for its shareholders. FHQ Developments' current holdings are presented in Table 3.

The second and third pillars – economic development and human resources – were created in response to challenges that FHQ Developments and its holdings identified, including inequitable policy and procurement processes, a lack of understanding of the benefits of Indigenous approaches to partnership and investment, and challenges related to Indigenous human capacity. Details on the three pillars are found in Table 4.

Table 4. Three-pillar Indigenous Economic Development Model

Investments	Economic Development	Human Resources
<p>A growing and diverse portfolio with more than ten companies, including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Great Plains Contracting • Ensign Energy Services • d3H Hotels Swift Current • Topa Contracting • Badger Daylighting • Plato Sask Testing • Pathway Supplies • Stone & Arrow Consulting • NuWind Energy • Mammoet 	<p>Fostering an ecosystem that supports Indigenous development:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sharing best practices • Support for entrepreneurship by member Nations and Citizens (e.g., <i>The Entrepreneurship Guide</i>,⁷ advisory services) • Influencing policy and programs that impact Indigenous development (e.g., procurement) • Educating government and industry on the benefits of Indigenous partnership and investment 	<p>Developing Indigenous capacity through Tokata HR Solutions:⁶</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Developing a database of Indigenous talent • Identifying skills gaps to target investments in training and recruitment • Expanded efforts with partnership with People First HR in 2020 • HR consulting for Nations and non-Indigenous organizations • Indigenous strategy services • Mentorship and internships

The impact of these three pillars extends far beyond FHQ Developments’ business holdings and FHQTC’s member Nations. For instance, investments in human capacity and improved practices related to policy and procurement break down barriers for all Indigenous businesses and contribute to a richer economy that benefits everyone, Indigenous and non-Indigenous.⁸

Governance

FHQ Developments is overseen by a seven-member Board of Directors. Six of the directors are from or have a connection to FHQTC’s member Nations; the external member is non-Indigenous. Five of the directors have a professional director designation, and four have extensive business and board experience outside of FHQ Developments.⁹

Two of the board seats are reserved for Chiefs of FHQTC’s Member Nations, with the Tribal Chief as Chair. The Member Nation Chief Directors bring an important understanding of the communities and ensure the end stakeholders have a voice at the table, which is important in an organization like FHQTC that provides services to its Member Nations.

Board recruitment is based on the organization’s skills matrix, with new members following standard nomination and election procedures. The directors recently approved a new bylaw in support of gender balance to engage more female voices in leadership. An annual skills matrix exercise has directors rate their skills and industry experience from 1 (Developing) to 4 (Expert) in the categories outlined in Figure 2.


 FHQ Developments Board Skills Matrix											
	Director 1	Director 2	Director 3	Director 4	Director 5	Director 6	Director 7	Director 8	Director 9	Director 10	Totals
Professional Director Skills											
Governance											
Leadership											
Investment Banking - VC/ Equity/Commercial Banking											
Internal Operations, Financial Accounting, Audit											
Investment/ Financial Management											
Innovation											
Information Technology											
Risk Assessment											
Strategy											
Stakeholder Engagement											
Organizational Management											
Indigenous Economic Development											
Human Resource/ Executive Performance Review											
Legal											
Project Management											
Industry Experience											
Mining Sector											
Oil and Gas Sector											
Construction Sector											
Technology Sector											
Renewable Energy Sector											
Ag Sector											

Figure 2. FHQ Developments Board Skills Matrix

To support the three pillars of the economic development model, the Board of Directors of FHQ Developments has three subcommittees: audit and investment, governance and human resources, and economic development. FHQ Developments invests back in the community through its efforts in each pillar. This effort is seen in the company's support of communities through scholarships, sponsorships, and job-creation.

Each FHQ Developments entity is governed by its own independent board of directors, has reporting requirements related to the number of FHQTC citizens employed, and is expected to invest in mentorship that ensures citizens are employed at all levels of the organization. These mentorship initiatives support capacity development, with the end goal of putting citizens in leadership positions in all entities. The company also shares best practices and examples of legal agreements with Member Nations and advises on economic development structures.

Accomplishments and Outcomes

An examination of FHQ Developments' overall model and approach to development reveals four important key features:

- (1) restricted dividends;
- (2) active roles in governance;
- (3) a shift from contract-based models to sustainable limited partnerships and majority-ownership positions; and
- (4) investment in the Indigenous economy as a whole. Partners must share FHQ Developments' commitment to governance, capacity development and community investment.

Restricted Dividends

FHQTC leaders have seen earlier business holdings fail because of distribution payouts that negatively affected FHQ Developments' ability to weather economic downturns and prevented it from accessing capital in pursuit of opportunities to grow and diversify its investment portfolio. As a result, FHQ Developments' leadership has been extremely cautious about distributing payouts. The board has established a benchmark for retained and net assets before distributions will be paid to Member Nations at the discretion of the Board.

Active Roles in Governance

FHQ Developments plays an active role in the governance and management of each of its entities. The company also invests in professional development by supporting executives and directors to attain director certification. This approach has increased partner and investor confidence and enabled the organization to mitigate risk by insulating business from shifts in political leadership.

A Shift from Joint Ventures to Limited Partnerships

When Thomas Benjoe took on his current role as CEO of FHQ Developments, the majority of FHQ Developments' interests were executed through single-purpose joint ventures or service agreements. FHQ Developments was not actively engaged in venture governance and did not see sustainable increases in Indigenous employment. The return to the FHQ Developments entity was often a small percentage of revenue and was tied to the duration of a specific contract. When that contract was completed, the revenue stream disappeared, and no business asset remained. This approach also put

pressure on Member Nations to seek out individual contracts through business development and marketing initiatives.

“Procurement policy only said companies had to be majority Indigenous to be considered Indigenous in the bid process, but often these relationships were just on paper,” says Benjoe. “We wanted to see real demonstration.”

FHQ Developments decided to pursue and enhance the limited partnership model by demanding higher percentages of ownership and assuming greater participation in management roles. They also favoured partners that valued the strengths of Indigenous business and shared a genuine commitment to increasing Indigenous participation in the economy.

“Capacity building is so important. Now we’re building assets, people, programs, locations,” says Benjoe. “This is the model we should be pursuing as Nations: build businesses with assets, build capacity, build careers, build the sustainable relationships we need to advance. It’s about quantity and quality. We ask potential partners: ‘How many Indigenous employees do you have? What jobs do they have?’”

FHQ Developments now uses joint ventures and service agreements as a testing ground for new business concepts and relationships. If the relationship works through a joint venture and is profitable, FHQ Developments then considers pursuing a limited partnership. Majority ownership and decision-making power over each entity are primary goals.

“We say to potential partners, you either get 100% of nothing, or you get 49% or less of something,” says Benjoe. “If we build this business, we do it together. Equally. There also has to be an understanding that we are going to share. We need to see that commitment to community, and to building capacity in our Member Nations.”

Two examples illustrate this shift in the approach to industry partnership with Indigenous businesses. The first example is the partnership with Stantec in Stone & Arrow Consulting. Stone & Arrow is the only partnership agreement that Stantec has in Canada. The second example is NuWind Energy, which is wholly owned by FHQ Developments. NuWind partners with BluEarth Renewables on renewable energy projects (e.g., the Outlaw Trail Wind Project, a 230 MW wind project proposed near Big Beaver, Saskatchewan).¹⁰

Investment in the Indigenous Economy

FHQ Developments’ approach is built on genuine collaboration, a commitment to building capacity, and the pursuit of sustainable partnerships with partners that value the Indigenous approach. This model has proven successful and has resulted in higher levels of Indigenous employment at multiple levels, while also reducing barriers to success for Indigenous business overall.

There is a reason industry and government are now looking to FHQ Developments as an example of success in this sector. FHQ Developments is building successful businesses that will benefit FHQTC citizens for generations to come, and they are doing it in their own way. Increasing Indigenous participation in the economy benefits the 11 Member Nations of FHQTC and their partners, while also generating significant returns for Saskatchewan’s economy overall. A recent industry report indicates the magnitude of these returns, as outlined in the quote below:

In 2019, the Saskatchewan Industrial & Mining Suppliers Association engaged PriceWaterhouseCoopers LLP to study the economic impact of local resource suppliers in Saskatchewan. Unsurprisingly, regional purchases generated substantially higher economic returns to the province, with one dollar spent on local suppliers reflecting \$1.51 in total economic output versus \$0.39 for a dollar spent on suppliers from outside the province. While FHQ Developments knew that the economic footprint of Indigenous business would be greater, their own studies have revealed findings that were much higher than anticipated. They found that for one dollar spent on an Indigenous supplier, the total economic output was \$2.50-4.00.¹¹

“What we’re building here is Indigenous wealth,” says Benjoe. “When we talk about impact, it’s not just about the bottom line. It goes much deeper. If you build Indigenous wealth, you build community wealth, which benefits all citizens of Saskatchewan in the long run. This is investment that makes good economic sense.”

“We’re teaching government and we’re teaching the resource sector that these are the types of models that we need to think about,” says Benjoe, “not only for the sake of Indigenous participation but for the sake of having a more vibrant economy and having a more diverse economy that thinks about more than profits and thinks about the community itself.”¹²

While FHQ Developments is not yet making any direct payment to Member Nations, it is investing back in community through efforts in all three operating pillars. For example, FHQ Developments supports community through scholarships, sponsorships, and job-creation. Each business entity also has reporting requirements related to citizen employment and is expected to invest in mentorship that ensures Member Nations’ citizens are employed at all levels of the organization. Mentorship initiatives support capacity development, with the end goal of putting Member Nation citizens in leadership positions in all the entities and ventures.

FHQ Developments President and CEO Thomas Benjoe is a case in point. A citizen of FHQTC Member Muscowpetung First Nation, Benjoe gained experience as an RBC commercial account manager after earning a Bachelor of Administration from First Nations University. Benjoe has invested heavily in his own professional development, especially in relation to governance, and has attained his Pro.Dir certification. He was a founding member of the Board of Directors in 2010. He took on his current role with FHQ Developments in 2017. Since then, Benjoe has expanded the company’s holdings in new sectors, including renewable energy and technology. Under his leadership, FHQ Developments is actively exploring opportunities in manufacturing, agriculture, the supply chain, and services to government agencies and crown corporations, while also positioning the company to expand beyond Saskatchewan’s borders.¹³

FHQ Developments takes its commitment to FHQTC Member Nation citizens seriously, including the sharing of best practices in support of entrepreneurship. The Economic Development pillar supports access to business consultants and subject matter experts; assistance and coordination of entrepreneurial programs and events; development and sharing of resources like the *Entrepreneurship Guide* and other guides, checklists, and templates; and sharing of procurement policies and processes.¹⁴

Benjoe and his team work to build relationships that ensure they are at the table with government and industry to answer questions and speak up about barriers to success for Indigenous individuals and organizations. As Benjoe says:

In a segment of our population that has been typically barred out from being able to participate in the economy, through government policy and other historic issues [that] have kept us out of the economy. Now what we're saying is, we're not asking for handouts to participate in the economy, we're asking for a hand-up.¹⁵

FHQ Developments' work extends that hand to all First Nations and individuals working to expand their economic footprint. Through its efforts to build Indigenous wealth through equity ownership, prosperous businesses, capacity development, and partnership with government and industry, FHQ is contributing to an ecosystem that is more supportive of Indigenous economic participation overall.

Overall, a common element to FHQTC relations and development is a focus on genuine, mutually beneficial partnership. Whether impacting internal or external institutions, pursuing for-profit endeavours, a common feature to FHQTC's approach sees leadership working with other First Nations, municipal, provincial, and federal levels of government, businesses, and community organizations to achieve its goals, while also paving the way for increased economic participation and success on the part of all First Nations.

Notes

1. All Nations Healing Hospital (2021), FHQTC (2021), Leading Thunderbird Lodge (n.d.), and FHQTC (2020).
2. Plato (2022).
3. FHQ Developments (2021b).
4. Great Plains Contracting (2022).
5. Invest FHQ (2022).
6. Tokata (2022).
7. FHQ Developments (2021a).
8. Invest FHQ (2022).
9. FHQ Developments (2022).
10. Outlaw Trail Wind (2021).
11. Invest FHQ (2022). For the PWC report, see PWC (2019).
12. YouTube (n.d.).
13. CBQ (2020).
14. FHQ Developments (2021a).
15. CBQ (2020).

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