

Indigenous Leadership: Governance and Development Project

Case Study

George Gordon Development Ltd.

Priscilla Wolf

Vern Bachiu

Murray Fulton

Johnson Shoyama Graduate School of Public Policy

University of Saskatchewan

March 2023

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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.

Murray Fulton, Principal Investigator
Marilyn Black, Researcher

Johnson Shoyama Graduate School of Public Policy (JSGS)
University of Saskatchewan, Saskatoon SK

About the Authors

Priscilla Wolf is a graduate student in the Masters of Journalism program at the University of Regina.

Vern Bachiu is President and CEO of Triall Consulting.

Murray Fulton is Professor Emeritus, JSGS.

George Gordon Developments Ltd.

Economic development is our new buffalo

Overview and Key Learnings

This case study profiles George Gordon Developments Ltd.'s approach to economic development, highlighting its key strengths, successes, and community outcomes. George Gordon Developments Ltd. (GGDL) is the economic development corporation of the George Gordon First Nation (GGFN).

GGDL aims to be a leader in First Nations business development as a partner of choice while working to improve the quality of life for the George Gordon First Nation. GGDL's purpose is to create wealth, employment, and opportunities for the community through four pillars linked through economic reconciliation: Strategic Partnerships; Property Development; Renewable Energy; and Agriculture.

GGDL's partnership model involves ownership of at least 51 percent of a business entity combined with limited equity investment. Such partnerships are beneficial because they spread risk and reduce the capital required, while providing access to the necessary expertise until the company has built up enough capital to reinvest and developed the expertise needed to run the business. As Glen Pratt, CEO of GGDL says, "We learned that in business it doesn't really matter how big or small you are. If you put in the same, you get back the same. So you're equals essentially when it comes to business."

GGDL's focus on property development emerged because of its treaty land entitlement claim that allowed it to purchase 118 thousand acres of land.

GGDL's focus on renewable energy and agriculture stems from their location in the Touchwood Hills and the access to resources – potash, crop land, and sunshine – that this location brings.

Social issues stemming from residential schools and the lack of reconciliation continue to affect Indigenous communities in Saskatchewan. According to Glen Pratt, CEO of GGDL, "The truth and reconciliation calls to action outline a lot of initiatives that should occur, but they often just receive lip service." He also notes that a lot of people view reconciliation as hiring a few people or giving them a token contract, rather than making them shareholders. "We turn down a lot of partnerships because we don't want to be tokens." Pratt emphasizes the importance of Indigenous ownership of businesses as a form of economic reconciliation, rather than simply obtaining employment.

The first challenge when GGDL started was political and involved getting the political leaders to create an independent economic arm. The second challenge was having the money to create an economic strategic plan to get into business. Most First Nations don't have the equity required to participate in meaningful projects.

The third challenge was having people who know what they're doing when it comes to economic development. The fourth challenge involved ensuring that the economic arm communicates well with the leadership and membership.

Background and History

George Gordon Developments Ltd. (GGDL) was founded in 2011 as the economic development arm of the George Gordon First Nation (GGFN). Based in the Touchwood Hills region of Treaty 4 Territory, GGFN

is composed of Plains Cree and Plains Saulteaux people, with its main reserve located approximately 100 km north of Regina.

The goals of GGDL are to create wealth and advance self-determination through economic ventures, opportunity, and job creation.

Governance

GGDL is governed by a board of five women and three men. While all the board members are Indigenous, not all of them are from GGFN. Glen Pratt, a member of the George Gordon First Nation, became the CEO of GGDL in 2017.

In 1992, GGFN signed a Treaty Land Entitlement (TLE) Agreement, which allowed them to reclaim or purchase approximately 35,600 hectares (88,000 acres) of treaty land owed to them but not received after the 1874 treaty agreement. GGFN's TLE board is responsible for acquiring land; once the land is acquired it is managed by the board of George Gordon TLE Holdings Inc. until it is converted to reserve status. GGFN is the sole shareholder of George Gordon TLE Holdings Inc. The Chief and Council of GGFN make up the board of George Gordon TLE Holdings Inc. and exercise oversight and have the final say on land acquisition decisions.

A portion of the TLE land was purchased in the City of Regina, with a plan to turn it into an urban reserve. Once the land has reserve status, the Lands Department will manage the land.

The George Gordon urban reserve will be one of five in the Regina area, along with the Cowessess, Ochapowace, Sakimay, and Piapot First Nations. GGDL believes that the purchase of this urban land will lead to job creation and financial gain for all members of the First Nation, both on reserve and in urban areas.

According to the Department of Crown-Indigenous Relations, most urban reserves have been established through specific claims and Treaty Land Entitlement settlements. These reserves offer status Indians the same sales tax exemptions for purchases of goods and services as rural reserves.

GGDL is headquartered at the George Gordon First Nation in Punnichy, Saskatchewan, with a sub-office in Regina that includes a business centre and meeting rooms available for use by community employees, members, and other First Nations communities. GGDL will also serve as the property manager of the urban reserve office located in Regina, which will be leased to other First Nations tenants including Kawacatoose, Carry the Kettle, and Fishing Lake First Nations.

Some of the key challenges that GGDL has faced involve governance. These challenges included political interference from a former Council member, as well as a lack of necessary governance documents, such as Land Designation, Land Code, and access to the First Nation Financial Authority. These challenges created conflict between the Chief and Council and GGDL, which had to be addressed in order for GGDL to move forward effectively.

Partnerships

Long-lasting partnerships between Indigenous communities and businesses can lead to significant economic growth and development. When GGDL first began working in economic development, it chose to start with a partnership rather than as a start-up. This decision was made because the partnership

offered immediate opportunities and paid off. At the time, GGDL did not have the capacity or resources to train people or build up the organization from scratch, so partnering with an established company allowed them to win contracts right away. GGDL's key partnerships are examined below.

ATCO Frontec

The ATCO Frontec collaboration began in 2011 as a joint venture between ATCO Structures & Logistics and GGFN to construct and operate the BHP Jansen Discovery Lodge, a 2,500-person workforce camp near the town of Jansen, Saskatchewan.

“The partnership with ATCO and GGDL is an evolution of the longstanding relationship that was originally formed to construct the BHP Jansen Discovery Lodge,” says Daniel Cyr, Board Chair of GGDL. The restructuring, which includes a 51% share for George Gordon, ensures economic profits, management positions, and supply chain opportunities.”

“As we look towards the future, we're encouraged by the opportunities our people will receive as projects develop in our traditional territories,” says Glen Pratt, CEO of GGDL.

Pesâkâstêw Solar

Pesâkâstêw Solar, a ten-megawatt solar project, is a limited partnership between GGDL, Red Dog Holdings Ltd., the economic development corporation of Star Blanket Cree Nation, and Natural Forces, a private independent power producer. The power generated by the project will be sold to SaskPower as part of a 20-year Power Purchase Agreement.

The Pesâkâstêw project was selected by the First Nations Power Authority (FNPA) as part of the First Nations Opportunity Agreement in 2019. The agreement is funded in part by the Government of Canada.

“GGDL wants to create a new opportunity. From there, we want to gain experience in the renewable sector by learning how to construct the project and create some employment for our community members. We'll work with our partners, whether it be the provincial government, the federal government, the City of Weyburn, and of course, Natural Forces and Red Dog. It's a real opportunity to enter the renewable energy sector. Being that it's a solar project, hopefully, the sun will continue to shine, and as a result, we'll continue to make power and sell that power to SaskPower.” says, George Gordon Developments Ltd. CEO, Glen Pratt

“The success of the Star Blanket and George Gordon First Nation with the Pesâkâstêw Solar Project has proven that First Nation-led projects in partnership with industry are a great solution for adding renewables to the Saskatchewan grid,” said Robert Apold, Principal of Natural Forces. “The initiative encountered several challenges, but teamwork and belief in partnerships prevailed.”

GGDL sees the solar power project as looking after mother earth while at the same time developing new opportunities in the renewable sector. GGDL believes governments and the energy sector must continue to work together to support Canada's clean energy transition. Rupen Pandya, President & CEO of SaskPower, agrees, saying, “Our goal is to reduce SaskPower's greenhouse gas emissions (GHG) by 50% from 2005 levels by 2030, and to achieve net zero emissions by 2050. The Pesâkâstêw project is contributing to our GHG reduction efforts while providing revenue opportunities for First Nations

communities. These partnerships will continue to be valuable as we add more wind and solar to our generation mix.”

Business Centre

GGDL is unique in that it operates its own business centre in the business district of Regina and is working on opening a second, larger centre on Broad Street. The goal is to provide employment opportunities for First Nations people on reserve in the middle of the city of Regina. GGDL uses the building for its own meetings and houses other First Nations organizations such as Carry the Kettle, Kawacatoose, and Fishing Lake. GGDL serves as the property manager and owner of the building.

Wicehtowak Limnos Consulting Services

Wicehtowak Limnos Consulting Services LP (WLCS) is a Regina-based full service environmental consulting firm that is wholly owned by GGDL. WLCS provides top-quality services to various industries and clients, including mining, oil and gas, power generation, construction, First Nations, government, and land management organizations. The company's name, Wicehtowak, refers to a partnership with a purpose, and this philosophy guides its interactions with all potential partners, clients, stakeholders, and regulators. WLCS has a team of experts with years of experience in a variety of projects and can handle projects from start to finish, including conceptualization, permitting, construction, operation, and decommissioning.

GGFN Climate Observatory

The GGFN Climate Observatory is owned by GGFN and operated by Wicehtowak Limnos Consulting Services LP. Its main goal is to provide advanced climate and environmental monitoring data that supports the Indigenous Community-Based Climate Monitoring Program, a national initiative. In addition to gathering data, the GGFN Climate Observatory aims to facilitate a community-wide discussion about science, climate, and climate change. As part of this activity, GGFN Climate Observatory has a state-of-the-art weather station that provides real-time readings to the George Gordon First Nation community about the local environmental changes they are experiencing. The observatory is funded by the Crown-Indigenous Relations and Northern Affairs Indigenous Community-Based Climate Monitoring Program.

Wicehtowak Workforce Development Program

The Winehtowak Workforce Development Program helps Indigenous clients in Regina and the surrounding area make informed, long-term employment decisions and build a sense of accountability for their own career success. The program offers a range of services and resources, including an onsite computer lab, client consultations, resume writing and job application assistance, interview assessments, mentorship support, specialized training opportunities, and access to premium job opportunities. In the past, the program has also offered training in areas such as heavy equipment operation, class 1a licenses, environmental monitoring, solar panel installation, construction safety, hospitality and tourism, and entrepreneurship. Since its inception in 2015, the Winehtowak Workforce Development Program has partnered with over 300 employers, trained or employed over 500 clients, and provided program and referral services to over 700 clients. The name Winehtowak, which means “partnership with a purpose” in Cree, reflects the program's focus on fostering strong partnerships with clients, stakeholders, and regulators. The program is open to Indigenous people aged 18 and over.

Tron Construction-Des Nedhe

Tron Construction, a company owned by English River First Nation through Des Nedhe, their development corporation, has partnered with GGD L to bring together a northern and a southern First Nation economic development corporation.

Potash

In 2020, GGD L purchased 150 acres of land from K+S Potash Canada, giving it the opportunity to serve as a supplier to K+S Potash Canada and other businesses in the area. The land is located near the K+S Potash mine near Bethune, Saskatchewan, about 60 kilometers northeast of Regina. As Glenn Pratt, CEO of GGD L says, "The acquisition of the property gives George Gordon Developments a significant opportunity to participate as a supplier to K+S Potash Canada and other businesses in the area."

Future of George Gordon Developments Ltd.

According to Glen Pratt, CEO of GGD L, the company has long-term aspirations for ownership and operation of various businesses, including a farming operation, residential and commercial buildings, and a construction company, with a focus on electrical and IT. GGD L also values the importance of training and employing their own members, and is currently mentoring members for future executive positions within the company. Pratt notes that investing in and retaining young, educated members of the community is beneficial for both the corporation and the community itself, as they are more likely to protect and serve the interests of the community in their business dealings.

Highlights

GGD L has a partnership model that involves negotiating agreements with industry without requiring equity from the Indigenous entity. This approach offers a competitive advantage and includes a strong Indigenous benefits plan for procurement, training, and employment.

GGD L believes partnerships are beneficial because they spread out risk and reduce the capital required, while providing access to necessary expertise until the company has enough capital to reinvest.

GGD L has invested in a solar project with a developer and another First Nation and plans to eventually own its own companies, both with and without partners. GGD L is preparing to invest in agriculture and hospitality.

Advice

Pratt offers the following advice to other First Nations when starting in economic development.

"Number one is try to separate the business and the politics. Number two is have a combination of band members and non-band members on your board and make sure your non-band members bring business skills to the table."

Pratt goes on to add the GGD L is successful because it competitive. "We're very competitive in our pricing and our approach and our proposals. We bring a lot of certainty to our proposals. You have to learn to be competitive. You're not going to get everything handed to you on a silver platter, and so take a look at your community's profile and base your proposal on your profile. Our profile was really simple.

We had four things going for us and the four things were tied to our location. We are located in the wind belt, the sun belt, the grain belt, and the potash belt.”

“*Economic Development is our new Buffalo.*” – George Gordon Developments Ltd. CEO Glenn Pratt

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