

Can resource development help make Arctic communities sustainable?

Chris Southcott



Photo credit: NWT Archives/Henry Biese Jones/N-1979-052, 1925.

Giant Mine, Yellowknife, Northwest Territories, 1954.

The demand for Arctic natural resources has increased dramatically over the past 20 years as new technologies have been developed and as resources in more accessible locations become depleted. The prospect of climate change making these resources even more accessible has intensified this interest in Northern resources. Is this a good thing for Arctic communities? In the past, resource development has often created more problems than benefits. American researchers have long pointed out the relationship between poverty and resource dependence that exists in the rural United States. Canadian resource communities have struggled with boom and bust cycles and the social problems caused by these cycles. Recent research in the Canadian North is increasing our awareness of the important environmental problems caused by past resource development. Canadian social scientists and historians have long pointed out problems associated with the “staples trap,” and international researchers continue to point to the dangers of the “resource curse.”

Given all these problems, should the people of Canada’s North look forward to a future of even more resource development? The answer would probably be no if they had any other option. The reality of the situation is that there are very few alternatives to resource development if these communities hope to have any sort of economic development. Increasingly people in the Canadian Arctic are realizing that the social and health challenges they currently face will continue and perhaps grow without economic change. They see that Northern communities need jobs and that in the short term the most likely source of jobs is resource development. They believe that if jobs become available, the youth will have reason for hope in the future. With jobs come a reason to stay in school. Employment income could help pay for traditional subsistence activities and keep cultures alive.

Given this need, can we change the way resources are developed so benefits to communities are increased and negative impacts are mitigated? This is the central question of a new research initiative currently under way called Resources and Sustainable Development in the Arctic (ReSDA). Funded primarily by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, the project is currently made up of more than 50 researchers at more than 28 institutions in all eight circumpolar nations working with a large number of Northern partners. The project includes researchers from a large variety of disciplines and areas of interest: from health to business, and from social work to ecology. It is a long term project whose first stage is scheduled to run for seven

years. The project is divided into four main themes: sustainable regions is led by Frances Abele at Carleton University, sustainable communities by Chris Southcott of Lakehead University, sustainable cultures by David Natcher of the University of Saskatchewan, and sustainable environments by Brenda Parlee of the University of Alberta.

The main objective of this project is to find ways of ensuring that resource exploitation benefits rather than hinders the well-being of Northern communities. There is some indication that the worst aspects of resource dependence can be countered by introducing new policies and models of development. These policies would increase local control of development, and ensure a higher share of resource rents are passed on to Northern communities. New land-claims agreements, impact-benefit agreements, and co-management boards may offer the potential for the development of natural resources in Northern Canada in a manner that increases the benefits for local communities, and ensures that development is environmentally sound. These new elements of the Northern economic landscape need to be examined for ways to accentuate their positive aspects.

ReSDA aims to produce policy-relevant research that will help Northern communities. Research will start by concentrating on the means by which we measure the impacts. To find out whether something is beneficial for a community, we need access to a reliable way of determining what the impacts are. By having researchers work with communities, we will be able to see how resources are developed, and what increases benefits to people living in the North. We will use community workshops and other methods to allow northerners to guide the research. By analyzing resource development practices using the critical lens of benefits to communities, we will be able to provide policy makers with a range of options for resource development in the Arctic.

The researchers and partners involved in ReSDA share a fundamental belief that resource development can be done in new ways in the Arctic. We can learn from past mistakes and from current successes. It is possible to develop Northern natural resources in a way that protects the environment, helps increase the number of jobs available to northerners, ensures a reasonable portion of resource revenues stays in the region, assists traditional activities and Indigenous cultures, and helps education initiatives in the North. ReSDA is working with communities in the region to help them find out how best to ensure that these things come about. ●

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