Urban Aboriginal Task Force
Progress Report Phase 1

December 2005

Introductory Remarks:

The UATF is an Ontario wide study of the experiences of Aboriginal people living in six urban areas: Toronto, Ottawa, Thunder Bay, Kenora, Sudbury, and Barrie-Midland. The need for a task force to research urban Aboriginal issues was first articulated by the Joint Executive Committee of the Ontario Federation of Indian Friendship Centers (OFIFC), the Ontario Native Woman's Association (ONWA) and the Ontario Metis Aboriginal Association (OMAA). This committee recognized the need to build upon the original Urban Aboriginal Task Force Study published in 1981, the first major research on urban Aboriginal people in this country. The UATF research is presently moving into phase 2 of its community based approach. The central task force committee has been working in conversation with the local advisory committees of Ottawa, Thunder Bay and Toronto in order to establish research priorities that meet both local and province wide objectives, including questions relating to health, education, identity and culture, housing and homelessness, economic development and employment, and other pressing concerns. Within the initial site of Thunder Bay, primary data is now in the process of being gathered through a diversity of research methods including: key informant interviews, plenary sessions, focus groups, and larger surveys. We are continuing to narrow research topics in Ottawa and Toronto and we are looking to commence preliminary consultations in the remaining three sites.

Phase 1 of the Urban Aboriginal Task Force research has consisted of two interrelated activities:

1) Preliminary Research (Toronto)
2) Community Advisory Committee and Task Force Meetings (Defining research priorities and methodology)

Specific Tasks Included:

1) The Organization, facilitation, and documentation of two preliminary research activities in Toronto:

a) Aboriginal Middle Class Plenary Session
b) Economic Development and Employment Focus Group

2) The Completion of a Preliminary Literature Review
3) The organization, facilitation, and documentation of:
a) Three Task Force Meetings
b) Six Community Advisory Committee meetings (two in each of the three sites: Toronto, Thunder Bay, and Ottawa)
4) The development of Research Assistant and Research Coordinator job descriptions
5) The development of a research ethics protocol
6) The development of research centers in each of the three sites

Research Findings

1) Preliminary Research (Toronto)

a) Aboriginal Middle Class Plenary Session

As part of Phase I of our study of Aboriginal people in urban centers in Ontario, we facilitated a plenary session consisting of thirteen participants who were broken into two groups for purposes of small group discussions. The purposes of the session was to gain a snapshot of the emerging Aboriginal urban "middle class" in terms of their activities, organizations, volunteer work, locations, and general lifestyle activities. Moreover, we were interested in identifying their unmet needs and cultural aspirations in the Toronto urban center.

The key findings of these focus groups were as follows:
1) Social Isolation: The majority of the Aboriginal middle class does not access the 50 – 70 Aboriginal organizations in Toronto. This is because these organizations are mostly service (or social problem) oriented, i.e.: homelessness, single moms, housing, and other forms of support.

2) Cultural Diversity and Community Fragmentation: An important difference between Aboriginal and other ethnic groups in the city is that there is a high degree of cultural and linguistic diversity that acts as a barrier to community building. The Aboriginal middle class does not live together in one specific area of Toronto. Rather, it is dispersed throughout a diversity of middle class neighbourhoods in the city.

3) Urban Centers and Racism: Aboriginal people are much less visibly different from others in multicultural Toronto and thus overt expressions of racism seem less pronounced than in smaller urban centers, particularly in the north. As well, it was suggested that internal racism is also less severe in Toronto as Aboriginal people tend to be more supportive of each other.

However, in terms of multiculturalism and ethnic diversity, the general lack of understanding of Aboriginal issues by newly arriving immigrants to Canada was identified as an important contributing factor to continued problems of racism against Aboriginal people in urban centers.

4) The Problems of Affirmative Action: It was suggested that preferential treatment in hiring led to a condition of being locked into working for Native organizations as part of employment equity initiatives and intern programs; this can then lead to perceptions of either tokenism or an exaggerated sense of one's capabilities.

5) Continued Links to Reserve Communities: Some links to the reserve community remain as urban Aboriginal people continue to visit family and friends living on reserve and to be loosely involved in Band politics. Urban centers can offer Aboriginal people a place to escape from the internal racism experienced on reserve and to acquire education and training so that one can then go back to their reserve communities and contribute in positive ways.

6) Urban Aboriginal Identity: Importantly, in Toronto, it was felt that unless you wear particular markers, Aboriginal people remain unrecognizable as Aboriginal. This cultural anonymity can act as a shield against racism as many Aboriginal people choose not to disclose their identity so as to avoid the risk of racial stereotyping and discrimination.

Many participants commented on the complexity of identity issues in terms of multiple and often conflicting senses of Self that continually change and overlap depending on various situations and stages of life.

7) The Unmet Needs of the urban Aboriginal Middle Class: There is a clear unmet need for Aboriginal language and cultural programs in Toronto. As well, Native Studies as a teachable in the high school curriculum needs to be supported in much more meaningful ways. Lastly, there is much need for the care of Aboriginal seniors in Toronto

b) Economic Development and Employment Focus Group (Toronto)

As part of Phase I of our study of Aboriginal people in urban centers in Ontario, we facilitated two separate, Toronto-based focus groups on the issue of Aboriginal economic development and employment. The morning session consisted of Aboriginal entrepreneurs and Aboriginal agency representatives while the afternoon discussion was attended by federal and provincial government officials as well as non-Aboriginal organizational representatives.

The key findings of these focus groups were as follows:

1) Racism and Stereotypes: Racism and the plethora of stereotypes of Aboriginality continue to be a major impediment to Aboriginal economic development and employment.

2) Aboriginality Culture and Identity: There appears to be an ongoing, popular perception that to be economically successful and to engage productively in a market economy means to 'sell out' one's Aboriginality and compromise one's traditional cultural values.

3) **Supportive Infrastructure:** Aboriginal success in the market place requires stability and support. Basic services such as housing, daycare, transportation, counseling, health care, peer and community support, must be in place for Aboriginal people to successfully engage in the labour market.

4) **Education and Training:** Appropriate education and training is considered key to Aboriginal economic success. Importantly, it must directly correspond with immediate job seeking activities as well as employment availability.

5) **Economic Information and Demographics:** More information is needed to identify and foster a community of economically successful urban Aboriginal people. With greater awareness comes the enhanced possibility of networking, peer support, and joint venture initiatives as well as creating the opportunity for mentoring, role models and the encouragement of aspiring Aboriginal entrepreneurs.

6) **Access to Capital:** Aboriginal entrepreneurs need greater access to capital and equity and supporting agencies need to adjust their lending practices to incorporate higher risk loans.

7) **Looking Outward and Partnering:** Aboriginal people need to move outwards beyond their traditional borders. Potential economic markets need to shift beyond the local Aboriginal community and into the broader national and international environments.

2) Preliminary Literature Review: Aboriginal People in Toronto

As part of Phase 1 of this research we conducted a preliminary literature review that helped guide our structuring of the Economic Development and Employment Focus Group and the Emerging Middle Class Plenary Session. As well, we felt that an initial study of existing research would provide some foundational understandings that would help demonstrate some of the gaps in existing research and thus help us to narrow the overall Task Force research priorities.

The key findings of the Literature Review were as follows:
1) Limited Existing Research: Importantly, our first standard survey of existing research (on-line/hard copy academic resources, government publications and some Aboriginal agency reports) revealed a relative absence of existing research on urban Aboriginal people residing specifically in Toronto.

2) Demographic Differences: There are significant demographic differences between the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal populations. Aboriginal people have higher birth and death rates, shorter life expectancies, a higher proportion of lone parent families, poorer health, lower levels of education and income and higher unemployment, homelessness and poverty levels.

3) Cultural Awareness and Policy Collaboration: In terms of social service delivery, there is an identified need to foster cultural understanding among non-Aboriginal people and to support Aboriginal service providers. It is also important to create a collaborative relationship among the three levels of Canadian government and the urban Aboriginal community in order to develop appropriate policy and programs

4) Social Service, Language and Culture: Two dominant program and policy development needs include social service delivery that meets the basics needs in life and programs that support Aboriginal identity through culture and language enrichment in the urban environment.

5) Youth and Women: There is an identified need for focused program and policy efforts in addressing the gaps in social services provided to Aboriginal youth and women.

6) Aboriginal Service Delivery and Governance: There is presently the existence of a well developed set of Aboriginal social service institutions. In terms of urban Aboriginal governance, the priorities of urban Aboriginal organizations are focused more on their specific operations and service delivery rather than in achieving a collective form of urban Aboriginal government.

3) Community Advisory Committee and Task Force Meetings: Defining research priorities and methodology (Toronto, Ottawa, and Thunder Bay)

Through extensive discussion with Task Force and CAC members the following tables outline the research priorities identified for each committee.

The Task Force identified the following six research topics that would ideally be common to all the local sites so as to provide consistency across Ontario. As well, the Task Force suggested that these topics be examined within the context of six 'across topic' research considerations.

Table #1: Research Priorities and Considerations of the Task Force

Task Force Topics of Research For All Sites	Research Considerations Across Topics
Racism	Gender Difference
Homelessness	Gaps in Service
Poverty	Elders and Long term care
Youth	Women and children
Women	Access to resources and legitimacy
Health	Assessment of Aboriginal services

In terms of the CAC discussions, Table #2 outlines the research priorities in common, as well as unique to, each research site.

Table #2 CAC Research Priorities

Research Topics Common To All Locations	Thunder Bay Research Priorities	Ottawa Research Priorities	Toronto Research Priorities
Racism	Economic Development and Employment	Education	Impact of Original Task Force
Youth and Women	Homelessness	Abuse of Aboriginal Self – Identification	City Hall Programs and Policies
Youth Services 7-17	Adult Poverty	Gap in Political Representation	Seniors and Elders
Middle Class	Addictions	Elder Housing	Government Funding Flows
Culture and Identity	Solvent Abuse and FAS	Housing in General	Aboriginal Services
Jurisdiction	Aboriginal Management Culture	Economic Development Profile	Link between adoption and homelessness
History	Cost of Living	Communication	
Health	Children and Justice		
Demographics	Child Custody		