

Abstract

The growing use of the Internet in community planning has created enormous opportunities to improve community participation in Indigenous planning, overcome constraints associated with face-to-face based participation, and enhance the planning process. Understanding some of the potential barriers and challenges unique to using online participation is a critical step in moving towards establishing new best practices in Aboriginal community development across Canada.

The study was guided by a fundamental question: *“How are First Nations communities using online tools to enable residents to more actively participate in the planning of their community?”*

The following are more specific research objectives set in the study: (a) to examine, through an extensive review of the relevant literature, the role that on-line tools can play in facilitating greater participation of First Nations residents in their community development; (b) to explore the various aspects of ICT that are relevant within the context of Indigenous land use planning; (c) to assess, through an examination of five case studies, the extent to which on-line tools are currently being utilized by First Nation residents in planning their communities; and (d) to suggest how on-line tools can be improved to enable First Nations residents to more actively participate in the planning of their community. Case studies included: Fort Severn First Nation, Mississaugas of the New Credit First Nation, Whitefish River First Nation, and Shawanaga First Nation, all in Ontario; as well as Nak'azdli Whut'en First Nation in British Columbia.

A working conceptual framework was developed to explore the role that ICT plays in planning in First Nations communities. In addition, challenges and opportunities associated with an

evident “digital divide” (the economic and social inequality with regards to access to and use of ICT) was identified between First Nations and other communities in Canada, providing further constraints to the Indigenous planning process. Findings from the study show clear evidence that ICT played a positive role in enabling citizen participation in public engagement. However, it was found that First Nations residents were not fully involved in the decision-making process and were not fully empowered in making any final decisions.