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NEWS RELEASE

Canada Must Do More to Recognize and Promote the Economic Contributions of Aboriginal Women

Assessment of economic development initiatives should cover social, cultural and environmental considerations

Montreal – In Canada most of the news reported about Aboriginal people is bad news. However, as the IRPP study being released today argues, there have been a number of under-reported success stories, notably in the field of women's community economic development (CED).

In this study, Isobel Findlay (University of Saskatchewan) and Wanda Wuttunee (University of Manitoba) explore innovations in Aboriginal women's community economic development in Canada. Their research centres on women's roles in three case studies of successful businesses: Great Bear Co-op (Déline, NWT), Neechi Foods Co-operative (Winnipeg) and ET Development (northern Manitoba). Each case suggests that Aboriginal women find inspiration for their business objectives in and measure their success by the values of their culture.

According to the authors, current approaches to measuring the impact of CED policies are too focused on quantitative measurement and undervalue the full range of women's contributions. The study focuses on the need to respect the cultural values at the heart of these enterprises and to recognize the importance of collective as well as individual well-being. In this regard, the authors underline the importance of values such as shared decision-making, co-operation and courage.

This study serves two important functions. First, unlike most of what we hear in Canada about the situation of Aboriginal people, it is a positive story. Second, it is a wake-up call to policy-makers that new indices incorporating the positive experiences of women are needed if the full potential of Aboriginal community economic development is to be realized.

Findlay and Wuttunee conclude that the case studies offer important lessons for policy-makers, notably:

- ◆ **The benefits of local decision-making.** While current policy emphasizes education and training and income support for individuals to compensate for labour market failures, the cases examined show the potential for new community-state relationships

that are less about enabling people to adjust to the market and more about empowering them to participate as full citizens.

- ◆ **The need for sharing lessons.** Greater effort must be made within the Aboriginal community to ensure the experiences of female entrepreneurs are shared more widely. Likewise, dialogue between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people must explore the lessons learned by female innovators in community economic development and how policies might be improved.
- ◆ **The need for new forms of measurement.** In developing the indicators that will better serve policy-makers and communities, “greater respect for Aboriginal ways of knowing and doing” is required. We must also understand the “visions and values” that count in the lives of these communities, say Findlay and Wuttunee. They recommend “multiple bottom-line” accounting approaches that include environmental, social and cultural factors in addition to the financial cost and benefits of doing business.
- ◆ **The cultural dimensions of community economic development successes and quality of life indicators.** The women in the cases the authors examine succeeded because they used their values to define economic participation and prosperity in their own terms. Efforts to change how economic performance is measured can profit from the experience of such women, particularly their enterprising commitment to cultural continuity and equity.

Aboriginal Women's Community Economic Development: Measuring and Promoting Success, by Isobel Findlay and Wanda Wuttunee, is part of the IRPP's Aboriginal Quality of Life research program. It can be downloaded free of charge from www.irpp.org

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