



# Indsights

A Window into the Indigenous Economy

Case Study

# Pawgwasheeng EDC

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**Pawgwasheeng EDC**

## What are Aboriginal Economic Development Corporations (AEDCs)?

Aboriginal Economic Development Corporations “are the economic and business development arm of a First Nations, Métis, or Inuit government and are a major economic driver for Indigenous communities” (Aboriginal Economic Development Corporation Capacity, 2020). These organizations own and manage subsidiary businesses to provide support to the broader community that they represent. They play a vital role in creating growing economic activity, stimulating local and regional economies, providing quality employment opportunities for their communities and providing services to their communities that may have otherwise been nonexistent. Their purpose is to create a future of self-sufficiency free from government support and financial independence for future generations (Aboriginal Economic Development Corporation Capacity, 2020).

Aboriginal Economic Development Corporations are not a new concept. Research suggests that they date as far back to the 1970s (Promise and Prosperity - The 2020 Aboriginal Business Survey, 2020). Up until recently, there has been little public awareness about these organizations and the role that they play in their communities. Today, the Canadian Council for Aboriginal Business estimates that there are over 400 AEDCs operating across Canada in a variety of industries. That number continues to grow (Canadian Emergency Wage Subsidy Critical for Aboriginal Economic Development Corporations, 2020).



AEDCs have a Board of Directors appointed by the Chief and Council on behalf of its shareholders, who are local community members (Canadian Emergency Wage Subsidy Critical for Aboriginal Economic Development Corporations, 2020). Directors operate with full independence in their decision-making and are accountable to their shareholders. In essence, they operate like any other private business in Canada (Canadian Emergency Wage Subsidy Critical for Aboriginal Economic Development Corporations, 2020). The Board of Directors is tasked with developing a plan, with community input, that focuses on economic development for the betterment of their communities.

AEDCs provide funding for services by reinvesting the funds earned into infrastructure projects, social and health services, technology, employment and job training, to name a few.



## Why Create an AEDC?

Aside from being the economic arm of Indigenous communities, they contribute to the community in the following ways:

### Reduce Risk and Allocate Resources Where Needed

Having an AEDC can help the community pool their resources where needed. Having the necessary resources under one roof allows for a more efficient business structure if things go awry (Bennet, 2016). This can be extremely beneficial for local businesses as they may not necessarily have the resources at hand to deal with challenges that may arise. AEDCs can allocate their resources and help when needed, ensuring that local businesses remain sustainable and successful.

### Separating Politics and Business

While it is impossible to separate the two completely, an AEDC can help in doing so. It does this by acting independently and establishing the economic development plan of the community. While community input is extremely important, an AEDC operates in full independence in its decision-making (Canadian Emergency Wage Subsidy Critical for Aboriginal Economic Development Corporations, 2020). Keeping these separate is important as community leaders may have their own thoughts and opinions on the direction the local community should head in. While their intentions are good, they may not have the same expertise as the board may have. If too much input is given to either party, it may have negative consequences for the larger community. Balance is key.

## Providing Community Support

Communities with an AEDC with a strong strategic plan ensure that the community's economic growth trajectory goes upwards, even when there are changes to the business landscape. (A Survey of Aboriginal Economic Development Corporations in Ontario Research Report, 2013). The AEDC often acts as an extension of the community it serves, and it is vital for community input to help initiate and establish the direction of the larger community plan (A Survey of Aboriginal Economic Development Corporations in Ontario Research Report, 2013). An open dialogue with their local communities is vital, and doing so early and often can help build the support needed to ensure discussion and community building.

### Solidifying Relationships

An AEDC can form relationships with other AEDCs and with the private sector. Those connections can provide future opportunities for knowledge transfer. Non-Aboriginal organizations that work with AEDCs may also build a deeper, more nuanced understanding of the Indigenous communities (A Survey of Aboriginal Economic Development Corporations in Ontario Research Report, 2013).

### Bringing in Outside Expertise When Needed

Board members can often leverage their relationships within the corporate world that small or locally owned businesses may not. Having access to these relationships can range from legal services and accounting services that may not be available locally (Bennet, 2016).

## Community Profile: Pays Plat First Nation



### Geographic and Firmographic Information

Pays Plat First Nation is an Ojibway community that occupies the North Shore of Lake Superior in central Ontario, about 175 kilometers northeast of Thunder Bay, Ontario. This community has a population of approximately 90 on-reserve residents inhabiting a 2.2-kilometre square territory. The Pays Plat reserve falls within the territories described in the 1850 Robinson-Superior Treaty.

“Pays Plat First Nation is home to a healthy and active community that enjoys modern amenities while staying in touch with their history and traditional ways of life.”

# Community Profile

## Brief Historical Overview

The first recorded contact between the Indigenous peoples of Pays Plat and settlers occurred in 1777, when a fur trader named John Long passed through the region. He noted the area's unusually flat topographical features, despite being between two mountains. This garnered it the settler nickname "flat land"; however, the Anishinaabemowin word for the community is "Pawgwasheeng" or "where the water is shallow"(Our Community – Pays Plat First Nation, n.d.). By the 1850s, Pays Plat First Nation signed a series of treaties drafted up by colonial negotiator William Robinson. The Robinson-Huron and Robinson-Superior treaties were intended to reduce conflict between European settlers and Indigenous Peoples, as well as open the surrounding regions up for increased exploration(Our Community – Pays Plat First Nation, n.d.). Signed under deceitful negotiation tactics, many community members in Pays Plat were not made privy to the subject matter of the treaties until the Canadian Pacific Railway arrived in 1883 to conduct land surveying and railway development. This lack of collaborative negotiations with the community is a trend that has continued since 1883, with numerous other development projects occurring on Pays Platland without their consent. In the early 1990s, the community began the process of filing land claim proceedings to address this issue, and in 2009 the community signed an Agreement-in-Principle to add more lands to the original reserve boundaries(Our Community – Pays Plat First Nation, n.d.). The final agreement for these negotiations is still underway.

## Contemporary Community/Business Profile

Pays Plat First Nation is home to a healthy and active community that enjoys modern amenities while staying in touch with their history and traditional ways of life. This Indigenous community offers many services that are beneficial to its members, including a community hall, fire hall, water treatment plant, pow-wow grounds, firewood processing yard, multipurpose facility and a business center.<sup>5</sup> These factors contribute to a thriving economy and other aspects of socioeconomic development within the community. In addition, Pays Plat First Nation also provides community health and wellness strategies, employment and skills training opportunities and easy access to other avenues of support for community members.

One example of economic productivity is the Pawgwasheeng Economic Development Corporation (PEDC). This company is 100 percent owned by Pays Plat community members and serves as one of the main drivers of economic stimulation and social development for this community.

# Meet Ginny Michano



## Meet Ginny Michano

Ginny Michano founded the PEDC largely because of her love of economic development. She believes that PEDC can empower the people of her community, giving them tools to learn valuable new skills with the ultimate goal of securing meaningful, gainful employment.

Michano, a mother to five daughters and grandmother to three, attended Confederation College for business. She has dedicated much of her professional life to working for Pays Plat First Nation. From finance officer to housing to community planning, Michano has her finger on the pulse and understands the needs of her community.



## Business Development

The East-West Tie Transmission Project consists of a 450 km double-circuit transmission electricity line that connects the Lakehead Transfer Station, near Thunder Bay, ON, to the Wawa Transfer Station in the town of Wawa, ON (East-West Tie Transmission Project, n.d.) and is meant to improve the reliability of electricity supply in Northern Ontario. Throughout this project, several First Nations were impacted and were therefore involved in the partnership including Pic Mobert First Nation, Opwaaganasiniing (Red Rock Indian Band), Michipicoten, Biigtigong Nishnaabeg (Pic River First Nation), and Pays Plat First Nation (Prokopchuk, 2019).

Pays Plat First Nation was invited to consult on the East-West Tie Transmission Project. Michano met with representatives from other First Nations and economic development officers from the area, she realized that Pays Plat was underdeveloped economically compared to other First Nations in the region.

Michano formed a committee within her community to share her experiences as part of the broader East-West Tie Transmission Project and to discuss next steps for community growth. AEDC Pays Plat First Nation did have an Economic Development Committee of Chief and Council, but its primary role is to handle formal consultations arising from infrastructure projects and support existing businesses.



### **The importance of forming an AEDC was two-fold:**

1. An AEDC would help navigate the relationships between the First Nation and the non-Indigenous partners who often aren't accustomed to working with Indigenous Peoples.
2. An AEDC would function as a business. It is a taxable entity that has a business structure rather than operating as a subsidiary of the First Nation. The Corporation operates at an arm's length from the Chief and Council as a completely separate entity.

The first step was to engage the Chief and Council in the conversation and gain buy-in from them for the formation of the organization, followed by gaining the support of the community and educating them on the vision for the organization and how the community would be positively impacted.

Once funding for the creation of the organization was secured, PEDC was officially formed in 2019.

# Business Development

## Successes

Less than a year after formation, PEDC signed a \$500,000 contract with the provincial Ministry of Transportation (MTO). Not only was that contract completed within timelines and on budget, but PEDC was also given great reviews by the ministry and other business partners on the project. PEDC was extremely proud of this project because it was 100 per cent Indigenous led.

Subsequently, PEDC secured a five-year contract with the MTO to service the picnic sites in the region, which also brought jobs for members of the First Nation. PEDC continues to pursue additional contracts that will bring further employment to the First Nation including a potential contract with the Department of Fisheries to do ongoing remediation work on one of the islands, particularly with the maintenance of the lighthouse and other environmental work.

The partnerships that PEDC has formed have ensured many community members have found meaningful employment and specialized training. Much of that work is skilled trades and mining and there is potential for formal education opportunities that would allow some community members to receive formal designations. Partnerships within the mining industry are not without risk as will be discussed in the 'Risks' section.



## Hurdles

The first hurdle occurred in the formation of the business: there had to be buy-in from the Chief and Council and the people of Pays Plat. People were skeptical because of the Economic Development arm that already existed in the First Nation, and the cost of creating the AEDC.

Michano has learned that some organizations and companies only want to partner with Pays Plat to get in on lucrative government contracts. “But we are showing them that First Nations bring a lot of value to a partnership - we know the lay of the land, we have the local expertise and we have people who are trained.” - Ginny Michano

Those hurdles and objections were eventually overcome through education, community engagement and persistence in applying for funding streams. It was critical in the early stages that there was consistency in the communication. Upon formation, partnerships were formed and contracts were signed relatively quickly, which helped build credibility and reassure community members that the PEDC was the right approach to economic development in Pays Plat.

## Financial Profile

The Indigenous Economic Development Fund (IEDF), offered by the provincial Ministry of Indigenous Affairs, provides grants and financing opportunities to Indigenous entrepreneurs, businesses, communities and organizations through three streams (Funding for Indigenous Economic Development, n.d.):

- Economic Diversification Grant
- Business and Community Fund
- Regional Partnership Grant

PEDC was a successful recipient of a grant that ensured they could form the Corporation. As a part of the application process, they were required to:

- Develop a budget for the organization which included:
  - Preliminary costs of business formation
  - Legal Fees
  - Capital and operating costs for the first year
- Create a business plan
- Create the vision, mission, and values of the organization
- Articulate their projected outcomes

Their participation and partnership throughout the East-West Tie Transmission Project was an integral part of the success of their IEDF approval, as a key outcome of that project was improving economic development in Northern Ontario.

Since that start-up grant, PEDC has also become a successful recipient of funding from the Rural Economic Development Program (RED) through the Ministry of Agriculture, Food, and Rural Affairs . This program is designed to support rural economic development by being a cost-sharing partner in projects undertaken by municipalities, not-for-profits or Indigenous community organizations.

Projects that qualify for this kind of funding include those that revitalize downtowns, address technology barriers, develop skills or improve service delivery (Rural Economic Development Program, n.d.). PEDC chose this funding stream to help promote Pays Plat through a virtual reality project that will bring education, cultural awareness, knowledge training with a local Elder, and an understanding of their business community.

In 2022, PEDC intends to apply for further IEDF funding to create a community engagement strategy to plan their growth.

**“One of our indicators of success will be when we can be completely self-funded.”**

**- Ginny Machino**

## Organizational Vision

### Mission

Pawgwasheeng Economic Development Corporation (PEDC) is a 100% Indigenous-Owned corporation by Pawgwasheeng, Pays Plat First Nation (PPFN). PEDC creates and maximizes economic development and business opportunities that promote the growth of our community and membership. We are committed to upholding our values, while maintaining dignity and respect for our traditional territory and ways of life (HOME, n.d.).

### Vision

Pays Plat First nation will prosper from the many opportunities in our area. PEDC will grow sustainable and meaningful opportunities for the Pays Plat community and our region that embrace our rich culture of respecting the land (HOME, n.d.).





For the PEDC, the definitions for success are different within the organization than they are throughout the community at large. One of the success indicators for the organization internally is to be self-funded and self-reliant.

When the organization was founded, the goal was to bring employment and training opportunities to the First Nation through partnership formations with non-Indigenous, Indigenous, and governmental organizations. These partnerships directly benefit the development of Pays Plat as a community.



## COVID-19

COVID-19 has been the most significant risk factor faced by PEDC since its formation. Projects were halted and communication ceased almost entirely. The loss of community connection, both on the reserve and off, could have derailed the work that had been started.

While Zoom became the go-to for business operations around the globe, the internet connectivity issues that are prevalent for rural communities removed many of their communication options. According to a 2017 survey conducted by the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission, just 24 per cent of Indigenous communities have access to high-speed internet (Greenfield, 2020). When it became safer to gather, outdoor, socially distanced engagement sessions and meetings became the norm on the warmer days. PEDC used the down time to finish components of its strategic plan. Thankfully, much of the community engagement had been completed prior to COVID-19.

## Industry Risks

PEDC needed to weigh the risk versus the reward of getting involved in the mining industry. Mining is an extremely complex industry involving many moving parts needed to ensure it remains successful and viable.

Mining is very expensive and requires access to capital. Production costs continue to rise, and as a result profit margins have decreased. Without the ability to raise funds from investors or by other means, cost is often extremely prohibitive for those attempting to enter the mining industry.

Furthermore, mining can be very dangerous. As mines get deeper, the risk of collapse greatly increases, putting workers at an increased risk for death or serious injury. The continued health risks of being underground also need to be considered as inhaling hazardous fumes can often have long lasting health effects.

Lastly, the environmental impacts of mining cannot be understated. Mining can contaminate local drinking waters, cause air pollution, harm wildlife and destroy the natural landscape of the region. These can have a direct impact on those who rely on the natural world for their food sources, drinking water, and other resources needed for survival.

# Growth and Future Opportunities

## Growth and Future Opportunities

PEDC hopes to partner with non-Indigenous businesses to open shops in the First Nation and employ more people in the trades, allowing more community members to stay in the community and find meaningful employment opportunities.

PEDC is creating a cultural awareness program that is unique to Pays Plat which will provide training and understanding for partners looking to work with them and will allow them to remain rooted in the history and culture of the First Nation, staying true to their roots.

The five-year plan includes purchasing some items for the organization, such as a truck and other capital items and to hire permanent full-time and part-time staff. Challenges for AEDCs Like any organization, AEDCs are not exempt from business challenges. However, they are also hampered by the challenges of overcoming a legacy of colonialism. French and English settlers stripped the identity and land of Indigenous people by forcing them to integrate and assimilate with European settlers, and, eventually, pushing them into residential schools and reserves where they were subject to the control of the Canadian government in every aspect of their lives. This has led to generations of Indigenous people being marginalized in Canadian society. It has had a profound impact on their health, socio-economic, and cultural outcomes.

The challenges that AEDCs and Indigenous businesses face are often unique to their situation in a way that many other businesses in Canada simply do not have to face.

## Access to Capital

For many emerging AEDCs, access to capital is an issue. Funding can be difficult to find. Many ADCs are also reluctant to seek funding from financial institutions and the government because there is a strong desire to be self-sufficient (A Survey of Aboriginal Economic Development Corporations in Ontario Research Report, 2013).

## Lack of Diversification of Markets

For many AEDCs, the ability to get their products — such as apparel, food, art, jewelry, books and skincare — and services to a wider market is a significant issue. The majority of their economic activity is within their local community, or the province or territory they reside in. The reason for this is the inability to participate in federal supply chains, despite many AEDCs having the ability to take on larger projects (Aboriginal Economic Development Corporation Capacity, 2020).

## Knowledge Gaps

Knowledge gaps can often exist within many AEDCs, including how to set up and run an AEDC (CCAB, 2013). Having limited access to skilled employees can make it difficult for AEDCs to train local members, and there is a need for job and skills training so that residents of the community can benefit from the local jobs that are created. These can range from finance, management, human resources, administration, and technological skills, such as computer and software skills (A Survey of Aboriginal Economic Development Corporations in Ontario Research Report, 2013).

# Growth and Future Opportunities

## What can be done to fix these challenges?

As difficult as these challenges may be, there are many ways to improve some of the challenges faced by many AEDCs. We will look at those below from the perspectives of the AEDC, the government and private industry.

### Aboriginal Economic Development Corporations

To ensure that these challenges can be addressed, AEDCs will need to implement policies to ensure that there is a balance between political and business interests. This is important as it establishes clearly defined roles of the AEDC and its members while keeping the local community in the loop. It is also important because it can demonstrate to outside parties that there are clearly defined roles and that influences outside of the AEDC, while important, are not competing with the goals of the AEDC (Aboriginal Economic Development Corporation Capacity, 2020).

Furthermore, it is important for AEDCs to be transparent and communicate their goals and objectives with the community as early and often as possible (Aboriginal Economic Development Corporation Capacity, 2020). Successful AEDCs have built the trust of the community by proactively communicating the risks and benefits of ongoing projects and decisions by keeping that dialogue open with the local community (Aboriginal Economic Development Corporation Capacity, 2020).



The AEDC's board members can play a crucial role in addressing many of the challenges faced. They are often the bridge between community goals and the economic goals of the AEDC. Having the right board members in place and leveraging their knowledge and experience can help increase awareness of the AEDC within the local community" (Aboriginal Economic Development Corporation Capacity, 2020).

Training opportunities can play a crucial role in helping to alleviate the challenges that AEDCs often face. Providing training to local board members in areas related to the business and strategic aims of the AEDC is extremely important, and successful AEDCs have recognized the importance of this (Aboriginal Economic Development Corporation Capacity, 2020).



# Growth and Future Opportunities

## Government

While there is some reluctance with AEDCs when it comes to the involvement of various levels of government and the strings that are often attached with this involvement, governments still play an important role in the success of AEDCs. Mainly, they can establish and enforce procurement strategies that ensure Indigenous organizations are involved in government supply chains (Aboriginal Economic Development Corporation Capacity, 2020). If larger contracts are awarded to non-Indigenous organizations, governments can enforce policies that make these businesses purchase goods and services from local Indigenous businesses (Aboriginal Economic Development Corporation Capacity, 2020).

Governments can also play a key role in providing funding to help increase the training and development of local community members. Improving funding for job training and hiring programs that are tied to AEDCs can support the career development of Indigenous People (Aboriginal Economic Development Corporation Capacity, 2020).

## Private Sector

The private sector plays an integral role in the success of AEDCs, as the majority of AEDCs have some sort of partnership with corporations. It is vital that Canadian corporations focus their interest and resources on relationship building with Indigenous

communities (Aboriginal Economic Development Corporation Capacity, 2020). Corporate Canada needs to involve Indigenous partners in decision-making, procuring goods and services, and providing job training and employment to Indigenous community members (Aboriginal Economic Development Corporation Capacity, 2020).

When corporations have partnered early and often with Indigenous businesses, success follows (Aboriginal Economic Development Corporation Capacity, 2020). Within business, it is often said that it is best to “get in on the ground floor,” and when it comes to AEDCs and corporate partnerships, successful AEDCs have reaped the rewards of early investment and partnership with corporations.

Furthermore, the private sector can play a pivotal role in the success of AEDCs by sharing their success stories. The private sector can benefit from this knowledge sharing as it can often provide vital information and understanding of Indigenous business while helping improve relations between the two groups (Aboriginal Economic Development Corporation Capacity, 2020). This is the goal of economic reconciliation with Indigenous Peoples, which “aims to create meaningful partnerships and mutually beneficial opportunities based on a holistic, values-driven approach to attaining community economic prosperity” (Reconciliation Canada, n.d.).

## What does the future look like for AEDCs?

According to a report published by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development entitled Linking Indigenous Communities with Regional Development in Canada highlights the importance that Indigenous business and AEDCs play in the Canadian economy. According to the report “Aboriginal businesses introduce new products/services, or new production/delivery processes relative to the broader Canadian small business sector—thus implying a higher propensity to innovate, particularly in manufacturing industries” (OCED, 2020).

By continuously innovating, Indigenous businesses and AEDCs will continue to help the communities they serve reach the goal of self-sufficiency. When looking at self-sufficiency, most AEDCs are referring to political sovereignty and creating generational wealth that can be used to finance programs and infrastructure projects that will not only benefit the community now but also benefit future generations (Aboriginal Economic Development Corporation Capacity, 2020).

With growth and innovation comes the ability to provide quality employment opportunities for community members. One of the key goals of AEDCs is to ensure access to employment opportunities for the local population. As AEDCs take on larger projects and partnerships with corporate Canada, this will only continue to grow (Aboriginal Economic Development Corporation Capacity, 2020).

The ability to take on larger projects and partnerships is important, not only for employment opportunities, but also for the long-term stability of the AEDC. Larger projects often bring in larger revenue and thus can provide more funding to the AEDC. The majority of AEDCs operating can now take on larger projects and are seeking these opportunities at a much higher rate than in the past (Aboriginal Economic Development Corporation Capacity, 2020).

Currently, it is estimated that Indigenous communities contribute close to \$32 billion to the Canadian economy annually. That number will rise to \$100 billion annually within the next five years, with appropriate support and investment in Indigenous communities (Vander Woude, 2020). To put this figure into context, the contributions of the Indigenous economies to Canada’s economy are currently larger than both Newfoundland and Labrador and Prince Edward Island combined (Amato, 2020).

Furthermore, Indigenous entrepreneurship and business ownership are growing at a faster rate than other self-employed Canadians, at five times the rate. Indigenous women are continuing that trend by starting businesses at double the rate of their non-Indigenous peers (Amato, 2020). This is likely to continue.

Given the impressive growth predictions for their economies, Indigenous business will continue to be a major asset and play a significant role in Canada’s economic stability down the road (Amato, 2020).



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