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LEADING TRANSFORMATION

INDIGENOUS ECONOMIC
DEVELOPMENT CORPORATIONS
AND THE POST-COVID RECOVERY

Canadian Council for
**ABORIGINAL
BUSINESS**



JOHNSON
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Executive Summary

Building from our previous work on Indigenous Economic Development Corporations (EDC), in 2021 CCAB conducted virtual and telephone interviews with 10 senior executives at different EDCs. The objective of this research was to gather a better understanding of how EDCs were managing the ongoing uncertainty of the COVID-19 pandemic and what impact this has had on their business operations.

After speaking to the different EDC respondents and hearing their stories about how they have fared during the pandemic era it was clear that there was no universal experience. Some of the key findings demonstrated that certain participants managed to grow their businesses while others found great difficulty just keeping their businesses profitable. This was an interesting dichotomy and was usually tied to factors including, but not limited to, what industry the EDC is engaged in. One constant however was the realization that the issues cited by many of our EDC respondents were not new problems brought on by the pandemic, rather pre-existing socioeconomic disparities simply exacerbated by COVID-19. This included things like difficulty retaining or hiring staff and relying on digital connectivity to continue business operations.

Through this report, researchers at CCAB and the University of Saskatchewan provide clarity around the measures that EDCs took to weather the storm while also hopefully laying the foundation for economic recovery amid a slowdown of the COVID-19 pandemic at the time of writing in 2022. This report provides value because it focuses on crisis management and can be a useful reference point for policy and decision makers looking to create coherent responses to whatever the next crisis faced by EDCs might be in the future.

Key Findings:

- There was a 57% reduction in revenue amongst the EDCs that we had economic records for.
- Diversification was key to economic survival for many of our participants. Having a broad business portfolio allowed EDCs to manage the uncertainty associated with sectors like tourism and retail.
- Finding, retaining, and attracting employees continued to pose a challenge for our respondents. These issues were all exacerbated by COVID-19 and the transition to digital work environments.
- EDCs call for increased training, education, and opportunities for workers, especially the youthful Indigenous labour force, in the post-pandemic era to help offset future economic crisis.

- Many EDCs also acknowledged that the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the importance of knowing and evaluating their business to be able to make quick but informed decisions. Some also mentioned the importance of having strategies for dealing with economic uncertainty, such as a crisis plan or succession plan.

Recommendations:

- **Increase support and capacity to improve access to funding:** funding should be designed for the unique needs of different Indigenous identity groups. As a strategic recommendation, governments and financial lenders should recognize the EDC's business specificities for an equitable economic recovery based on its singularities.
- **Encourage digital transformation and innovation:** EDCs can encourage innovation by investing in new technologies to improve business, decreasing costs, fast adapting, and increasing market participation. In parallel, government and Industry should work to develop partnerships and strategies to facilitate Indigenous connectivity.
- **Develop strategies to expand mentorship and training programs:** The training and hiring process should be developed in partnership with Indigenous communities to determine culturally appropriate and comfortable ways to hire and retain Indigenous workers.
- **Accessibility and availability of procurement opportunities:** Efforts must be made by the federal government to build relationships, improve access, and gain a better understanding of EDC capabilities to improve procurement opportunities.



1. Project Background

Project Background

Economic Development Corporations and the Indigenous Economy

The Indigenous economy is a crucial but often overlooked part of the broader economy and Canada's reconciliation efforts. Recent data from the Government of Canada estimates that there are over 50,000 Indigenous businesses in Canada, a number that has more than doubled since 1996.¹ Previous CCAB research demonstrates that Indigenous businesses have the capacity to support 24% of the Federal government's procurement needs.² According to the 2020 census, the Indigenous economy in Canada produced a gross domestic product (GDP) of \$48.9 billion dollars. Indigenous economic output had been growing steadily prior to the pandemic before it experienced a significant decline of 9.5% in 2020. However, Indigenous economies are resilient with the CCAB estimating that GDP attributable to Indigenous peoples is expected to recover and increase to \$100 billion by 2024. It is important to note that although the Indigenous economy in Canada is strong and rapidly expanding there are still issues that need to be addressed, particularly surrounding hiring and retaining employees. The number of jobs held by Indigenous peoples grew by only 10.3% from 707,935 in 2012 to 781,145 in 2020 when during the same period the economic output from Indigenous peoples grew 18.5% from \$81.9 billion to \$97 billion.

One type of business that holds a unique place in the Indigenous economy are Economic Development Corporations. These firms are owned by one or more Indigenous communities and act as a means of revenue generation for investors and members of the community. They operate at arms-length from Indigenous leadership but often work to employ members of the community, contribute to community socio-economic well-being, and own or invest in local businesses. For example, an EDC may invest in a nearby fishing operation, support construction and maintenance services at a mine, and own and operate the gas bar and grocery store on their reserve. The larger scale of operations compared to many Indigenous businesses and their

¹ Statistics Canada. (2016a). The 2016 Census of the Population. Employed Labour Force, Self Employed, Aboriginal Identity. No locatable pagination.

² Canadian Council for Aboriginal Business. (2019). "Industry and Inclusion: An Analysis of Indigenous Potential in Federal Supply Chains". https://www.ccab.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/CCAB_Research-Report_web.pdf. Page 1.

connections to the well-being of their community makes them an essential part of the Indigenous economy.

This study aimed to explore how the pandemic has impacted development corporations. Have pre-pandemic projections related to the trajectory of Indigenous-owned business successes been impacted after almost two years of pandemic economics? How have First Nation economic development corporations, the engines driving the First Nations economy, weathered pandemic-related economic uncertainty? And finally, how are these EDCs preparing for the era of post-pandemic recovery? By addressing these questions, the report will provide a more thorough understanding of the Indigenous economy in Canada and how it is faring in the period of economic recovery post-pandemic.

We also recognize that in underserved and often remote communities, the EDC and the local economy are inextricably linked to the socio-economic welfare of the community. It is important to note that Indigenous Canadian communities have been dreadfully impacted by COVID-19. It is important to note that many of the socioeconomic issues that arose during the COVID-19 pandemic were not new issues faced by Indigenous communities and businesses, rather a magnification of pre-existing barriers to prosperity. Indigenous peoples' concerns surrounding remoteness of communities, digital connectivity, and the development of social services pre-date COVID-19, which has only aided in exacerbating many of these conditions. These circumstances have had a prolonged existence amongst Indigenous communities and have largely gone unaddressed until the pandemic brought them to a climax in 2020.

The pandemic has highlighted the inequalities faced by Indigenous Peoples and their economies across Canada, reinforcing the need for research committed to how this sector of the economy operates to better tailor aid during future global crises. As the natural experiment of restarting a post-pandemic economy continues, it is imperative that we understand the unique impacts that the COVID-19 pandemic has, and will continue to have, on EDCs in Canada.

[Research Partners and Contributors](#)

[About Canadian Council for Aboriginal Business \(CCAB\)](#)

Canadian Council for Aboriginal Business (CCAB) is committed to the full participation of Indigenous Peoples in Canada's economy. As a national, non-partisan association, CCAB has a mission to promote, strengthen and enhance a prosperous Indigenous economy through the fostering of business relationships, opportunities, and awareness. CCAB offers knowledge,

resources, and programs to its members to foster economic opportunities for Indigenous Peoples and businesses across Canada.

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For more information, visit www.ccab.com.

[University of Saskatchewan \(USASK\)](#)

Recognized for supporting high-quality, ethically sound research, USASK is committed to uplifting relationships through an engaging framework based on Right Relations and an active commitment to earn and nurture trust and faith in relationships with Indigenous peoples across the University.

The USASK's School of Public Policies - Johnson Shoyama (JSGS) and its honorable members are devoted to their research and writing in order to make an impact on issues affecting Canadians and the global community. Working together and alongside colleagues in the public service and industry, our faculty have made significant research strides in a number of critical areas related to innovation, science and technology policy, social policy and inequality, and governance.

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Northern Policy Analytics (NPA)

Special recognition to **Northern Policy Analytics (NPA)**, a community-inspired applied policy and research consulting firm based in the Yukon and Saskatchewan, for all contributions in developing this report during the Covid-19 pandemic. Tireless in following its strategic Vision, Northern Policy Analytics continues to help businesses and communities to identify information and resources required to improve the economic outcomes while mitigating the impacts of colonialism.

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2. Methodology

Methodology

This study aimed to explore the experiences of Indigenous EDCs during the pandemic, given their unique place in the Canadian and Indigenous economy. Researchers took a mixed-methods approach, including quantitative and qualitative analysis. The survey instrument consisted of twenty-two questions which were vetted by CCAB staff, university ethics, and a former CEO of a Canadian EDC.

The research aimed to interview participants and compare their responses to data previously collected by CCAB in their 2019 Aboriginal business survey. The new survey covered current business characteristics using the same questions as the 2019 business survey. This added depth to the analysis and effectively bracketed the pre-pandemic scenario with today's ongoing dilemma, data for which was captured in the first section of the questionnaire. The second section of the questionnaire explored the impacts of the pandemic.

The survey questions covered five themes: general impact, effects on relationships, financing and funding, and outlook and recovery.

Participants

Ten senior executives of EDCs were selected to participate in 30–60-minute interviews. Eight participants had participated in the previous national business survey conducted in 2018-19, meaning CCAB had detailed business survey data on the majority from before the pandemic. The sample drawn reflects to the best of our ability at a national range, however, due to the severe challenges the pandemic has created in First Nation communities not all of the original sample could participate.

This survey oversampled Saskatchewan with four First Nation respondents, in this scenario. The survey also included three respondents from the far north with two from Yukon and one from NWT. In addition, the surveys were also completed by EDCs in Nova Scotia (representing Atlantic Canada), Ontario, and British Columbia, providing a strong cross-country breakout.



3. Introduction

Introduction

About First Nations Economic Development Corporations

First Nations economic development corporations are business ventures that invest community-held monies and have oversight of at least one subsidiary business on behalf of the Indigenous community they represent.³ They are important actors within a thriving Indigenous economy, with the CCAB estimating the number of EDCs in Canada to be close to 500.⁴ They help promote economic stimulation and business development for First Nation, Metis, and Inuit communities across the country. These community-owned corporations invest in, own and/or manage subsidiary businesses with the goal of benefiting the Indigenous citizens that they represent.⁵

EDCs often have a diverse business portfolio under their umbrella of operation in economic sectors ranging from natural resources, energy, construction, hospitality, travel and tourism, the arts, professional services, and information technology. They are a key economic driver for the Indigenous communities that they represent, with much of the revenue generated from business operations being re-invested back into the community through various structures like Chief and Council who are best positioned to spend the money meaningfully and efficiently on community needs.⁶

Apart from the economic stimulation that EDCs provide to Indigenous communities, they also have the capacity to promote social development through avenues like infrastructure, skills

³ Canadian Council for Aboriginal Business. (Feb 2020). National Perspectives on Indigenous Economic Prosperity: Aboriginal Economic Development Corporation Capacity. <https://www.ccab.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/CCAB-Report-1-web.pdf>. Page 4.

⁴ Ibid, Page 4.

⁵ Canadian Council for Aboriginal Business. (July 2015). Community and Commerce: A Survey of Aboriginal Economic Development Corporations in Ontario. https://www.ccab.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/Community_and_Commerce_2015_web.pdf. Page 3.

⁶ Ibid, Page 4.

development, and employment training. Economic development aside, EDCs are oftentimes beacons of cultural and community development within the regions where they operate within.

These companies are often established to provide a stream of own-source income to the community to help finance the built-in social purpose that guides their operations.⁷ Much of the income generated from EDCs is reinvested into important facets of a healthy society, like bolstering the social safety net or creating capacity for increased participation in the Canadian economy.

One of the primary forms of community reinvestment is related to employment and skills development. EDCs often identify two main types of training needs within the community. The first involves the higher-level executive skills needed to run an EDC, such as business administration, finance, and board training.⁸

The second focus area is helping community members develop hard skills specific to the EDCs industry (e.g., heavy equipment, industrial training) and achieve the necessary credentials to qualify for these jobs (e.g., driver's license, apprenticeship hours).⁹ Within this capacity, collaborating with the community allows EDCs to provide tools and resources for long-term prosperity and increased self-sustainability amongst Indigenous communities.

Impacts of the pandemic

The survey results indicate that COVID-19 had negative impacts on EDC finances, especially on business revenues, but also some unique outcomes related to employee-management relations, community response, and the idea of “pulling together” as a community to combat the pandemic. Financial outcomes depend on the industrial sectors the EDC is involved in.

⁷ Canadian Council for Aboriginal Business. (Feb 2020). National Perspectives on Indigenous Economic Prosperity: Aboriginal Economic Development Corporation Capacity. <https://www.ccab.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/CCAB-Report-1-web.pdf>. Page 4.

⁸ Canadian Council for Aboriginal Business. (July 2015). Community and Commerce: A Survey of Aboriginal Economic Development Corporations in Ontario. https://www.ccab.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/Community_and_Commerce_2015_web.pdf. Page 5.

⁹ Ibid, Page 5.

Industries like tourism and retail sales were heavily impacted along with sectors tied to exporting commodities such as fish and seafood.

The severity of public health measures enacted locally, such as lockdowns and restrictions, leading to either temporary or permanent closures meant that some industries were more impacted than others. For example, in western Canada the provincial government of Alberta's strategy of declaring the oil industry and the oil sands programs as an essential service shielded many EDCs located in Alberta and Saskatchewan that held contracts in the sector.¹⁰

The survey found that EDCs demonstrated resilience during the last year and a half by responding promptly to the rapidly changing environment. They obtained funding from the federal and provincial governments, and many had diversified their portfolios before COVID-19 leaving them more adaptable in the current climate.

Some respondents were aware that the rapidly changing economic environment meant that they must look for ways to sell unnecessary assets and invest in new ones. Empathy was a clear message that permeated many of the interviews. Almost every participant stated they felt optimistic for the future despite listing pressing needs and challenges reinforcing the entrepreneurial spirit of Indigenous development corporations in Canada.

In Canada some First Nations could be considered comparable to low- and middle-income countries (LMICs). Economic recovery in some LMICs may be much slower, and the distress associated with it will be substantial. Economic asymmetries between high-income countries (HICs) and LMICs are likely to increase because of the long-term effects of COVID-19 and will need to be counteracted with appropriate collaborative arrangements between rapidly and less rapidly recovering countries.¹¹

¹⁰ Graney, Emma. (2020). "Alberta to declare oil sands workers essential as province prepares COVID-19 pandemic response," *Toronto Globe & Mail*, March 24, <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/canada/alberta/article-alberta-to-declare-oil-sands-workers-essential-as-province-prepares/>. No locatable pagination.

¹¹ Harald Brüssow and Kenneth Timmis. (2021). Editorial COVID-19: long covid and its societal consequences, *Environmental Microbiology*, 23, 4077–4091 doi:10.1111/1462-2920.15634. No locatable pagination.



4. Business Impacts

Business Impacts

First Nations Economic Development Corporations: Business Portfolio

The economic opportunities afforded remote Indigenous communities, which make up most of our sample EDCs, are usually limited unless major mining or other natural resource activity such as fisheries and timber harvesting are active in the region. Many EDCs operate a grocery store which provide considerable revenue and some local jobs, but they usually have a low ROI of less than 4%. These stores also generally carry high freight charges to service their small, remote markets and have limited access to skilled management.

At the announcement of the formation of Eagle Spirit Energy Holdings Ltd., in 2012, Dave Tuccaro, one of Canada’s top Indigenous businesspeople, stated that: “major corporations do not understand that the era of a business-as-usual approach to offering beads and trinkets to First Nations for projects in their traditional territory is over. Aboriginal people are not anti-business, and they recognize the opportunities that development brings, but projects need to be done on their terms.”¹²

The EDCs that participated in this study collectively had a business portfolio consisting of a total of eighty-seven businesses, with a range of between two and thirteen separate business entities (Table 02).

Top Industries	2019	2021
Fisheries, gaming, retail, real estate, renewable energy	6	7
Investments, forestry	6	7
Forestry, retail, construction	2	8
Tourism, retail, Industrial services, agriculture	12	13
Industrial construction, mining	6	7
Retail, manufacturing, hospitality, property development	13	18

¹² See: Cision (2012) Game Changing First Nations Energy Company Announced, <https://www.newswire.ca/news-releases/game-changing-first-nations-energy-company-announced-510830771.html>. No locatable pagination.

Utilities, real estate, communications infrastructure	11	10
Fuel, mechanical, and professional services	5	4
Mining, retail, real estate, tourism	5	8
Hydro, construction, fisheries	-	5

Other common business activities include gas stations, convenience stores, and some type of freighting activity, either long haul freight or expediting. This demonstrates the remoteness of communities and an attempt by EDCs to reduce freight costs by directly investing in the transportation and logistics sector.

As many of the EDCs studied in this report are active in the natural resource sector, it was common to see drilling firms, camp catering companies, and heavy iron/machinery firms in their business portfolios. Firms that specialize in tertiary level skill sets such as surveying and remote sensing, GIS mapping, and exploration firms in mining or aviation either fixed wing or rotatory, were less common amongst participants.¹³

The sample also demonstrates the increasing propensity of EDCs to sell services or goods into other provinces or territories in Canada, representing market expansion and diversification of markets. Four of the respondents said that they were selling services or goods internationally, thirty percent (30%) of which noted selling in the USA and Mexico.

Surprisingly one EDC replied that they do not do business in their own community, which in this case shows the division between local community development corporations operating at the community scale and an EDC investing in larger scale regional and national projects, as shown in Table 03.

¹³ Swartz Kenneth I. (Dec 2014). "The People's Airlines" *Skies Magazine*. <https://skiesmag.com/news/thepeoplesairlines/>. No locatable pagination.

Question: In the past year, in which of the following places did your business have clients?	Yes	No
Within your local community	9	1
In other parts of your province/territory	10	0
In other provinces/territories in Canada	6	4
In the U.S./Mexico	3	7
In countries other than the U.S./Mexico	4	6

Indeed, while eight of the sampled EDCs were owned by a single community, it is not uncommon to find multiple First Nations communities grouping together to finance and manage an EDC. Over twenty-five communities worked collectively in one of the sampled EDCs, while another provided economic development opportunities to eight communities.¹⁴

Government and Financial Institutions

Procurement

Due to the larger and more diversified business structure of EDCs compared to a typical Indigenous business, they are often capable of handling extensive procurement opportunities. Often, companies within their portfolios operate in sectors commonly sought out by government procurement opportunities like construction or manufacturing and generally have more experience managing large contracts.

However, in our sample only one respondent worked with the federal government, while many EDCs interviewed were actively involved in sales to a provincial or territorial government. Municipal governments were less likely to be markets for EDCs, although three of our sample EDCs did have business activity at the municipal level (see Table 5).

Canada’s Indigenous Business Directory (part of the Procurement Strategy for Indigenous Business program) is designed to assist and support Indigenous businesses in the pursuit of

¹⁴ EDCs also partner with each other Indigenous and non-Indigenous and private sector firms to establish business entities and project their economic reach into larger economic regions and opportunities. The First Nation EDC may be either active or silent partners in these partnerships, but the goal is to share proportionately in the profits and acquire jobs for Band members. First Nation EDCs can use their government ownership status to attract grants

business opportunities, including federal procurement. This directory is a resource available to all levels of government, as well as the private sector, and is used to identify Indigenous businesses and assess their capabilities to carry out partnerships related to work completion.

While these collaborative opportunities exist, the lack of federal procurement business activity suggests barriers to accessing federal contracting opportunities, which continues to be an issue faced by EDCs and Indigenous businesses in Canada more broadly.

Table 5: Government Procurement

In the past year, in which of the following places did your business have clients?

Level Of Government Sales	Yes	No	No Reply
With federal government	1	6	3
With the provincial/territorial	6	2	2
With municipal government	3	4	3

COVID-19 Funding Programs

Additionally, eight of the ten businesses surveyed mentioned that they applied for COVID-related funding from the federal government, while two other EDCs stated they did not qualify for any of the assistance programs. The most common programs accessed were Canada Emergency Business Account (CEBA), Canada Emergency Wage Subsidy (CEWS), Canada Emergency Rent Subsidy (CERS), and Indigenous Community Business Fund (ICBF).

Half of the EDCs applied for COVID-related funding at the provincial or territorial level of government, but most businesses that accessed COVID-related funding said that the money they received was helpful but fell short of their larger funding needs. Those denied funding support lacked the financial records required to meet government approval, specifically, not being able to prove revenue from the prior fiscal year which speaks to auditing and accounting challenges.

Banks and Aboriginal Financial Institutions

In the survey, respondents were asked if, prior to the pandemic, *did your organization have outstanding loans with banks or an AFI (Aboriginal Financial Institution) such as NACCA (National Aboriginal Capital Corporations Association)?*

While there is a general perception that most EDCs receive considerable support from their banks or their regional NACCA, it appeared that when it came to financial management issues,

our respondents appeared to have less contact than expected based on the question related to loans. Six out of the ten respondents reported having loans prior to COVID-19 with the banks, three did not, and one gave no response. Only two respondents had financial commitments with an AFI or the FNFA (First Nation Financial Authority), seven did not, and one received no response.

Very few CEOs provided feedback to us regarding their relations with their bankers, with only two offering a commentary:

“Banks were fairly receptive and understanding. Did what they could. Overall positive.”

and

“The FNFA was open to assisting us with payment plans and granted it. It was a bit of a process, but it saved \$200,000 in interest. Charter banks were not.”

Throughout the pandemic NACCA helped manage government funding for Indigenous businesses during the pandemic in line with their mandate to find solutions and support Indigenous entrepreneurship.

A recent CCAB survey found that nearly half (43%) of Indigenous business respondents had no current lending relationships with AFIs, banks, credit unions, or government lenders,¹⁵ a finding that mirrors data gathered within this research. This lack of an existing lending relationship may pose a barrier to organizations requiring quick access to capital in a crisis or when projects have short or limited time. The sample also included a range of newer and older EDCs with two of the firms having been in existence less than 4 years while five had between 20 and 40 years of experience.

On average, the sample had eighteen years of business experience. The data on years since formation is helpful, though it should not be equated with continuity of business activity. Many EDCs go through periods of limited activity, especially those dependent on the boom-and-bust

¹⁵ Canadian Council for Aboriginal Business. (Jan 2022). COVID-19 Indigenous Business Survey: Phase III. <https://www.ccab.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/Covid-Phase-3-report-EN-r1-FINAL.pdf>. Page 28.

economies of the resource sector. This can result in deviations between business activity and years of operation with fluxes tied to sectoral involvement.

EDC Finance and Revenue

Of the ten EDCs participating in the project, CCAB had financial reports for eight based on participation in the 2018 CCAB survey. These eight collectively had revenues of just over an estimated \$291 million in gross revenue in 2018 and had 1247 employees working for them and their subsidiaries.

The EDC revenues as reported to CCAB ranged from a low of \$2.5M to more than \$90,000,000. Four of the 2018 EDCs had revenue in excess of \$25M and only one had revenues of less than \$10M. These were substantial companies. It should also be noted that CCAB did not select the companies to be interviewed based on their 2018 revenue.

By 2021, the picture had radically changed with five of the eight EDCs reporting losses in gross revenue totalling \$141M. The total revenue generated by the ten EDCs in 2021 was estimated to be \$302 million, but \$74 million of this increase was generated by one outlier firm which increased its revenue from over \$90 million to just over \$165 million in the three-year interval 2018 to 2021.

Removing this exception from the equation we see revenues for the other firms dropping from \$200 million down to \$86 million a 57% reduction in revenue generation.

Table 06: Estimates of Gains and Losses by ADCs 2018-2021

Organization	Revenue 2018 (EST)	Revenue 2021 (EST)	Change 2018-2021	% Change
EDC 1	\$13,700,000	\$318,000	-\$14,018,000	-102.3%
EDC 2	\$10,000,999	\$870,000	-\$9,130,999	-91.3%
EDC 3	<i>Not Reported</i>	≈\$42,500,000	<i>Estimated Loss</i>	-
EDC 4	\$57,604,000	\$14,000,000	-\$43,604,000	-75.7%
EDC 5	\$28,500,999	\$42,850,000	\$14,349,001	50.3%
EDC 6	\$75,202,997	\$2,300,000	-\$72,902,997	-96.9%
EDC 6	\$92,000,000	\$166,000,000	\$74,000,000	80.4%
EDC 8	\$2,501,998	\$1,300,000	-\$1,201,998	-48.0%
EDC 9	<i>No Survey</i>	\$5,000,000	<i>Estimated Loss</i>	-
EDC 10	\$11,500,000	\$25,000,000	\$13,500,000	117.4%

The two new participants in 2021 both reported that they would be posting losses in 2021 compared to their earnings in 2018, which had been generating a positive trend. We found that CEOs were reluctant to discuss the losses they were incurring, citing late audit reports, or skirting the question with responses that were indirect. However, one CEO of a firm which is posting a 50% reduction in revenue but who has years of experience in their position noted:

“The negative side of COVID has been that it's cost us money. To implement the new technology to be able to have remote workstations, laptops, things like that, we've had to pay for them. There's been a loss of revenue as well on the resource side, tour buses can't come to Canada, so that's been a real hit for us.”

Only three of the ten EDCs reported revenue increases, one of which jumped from around \$90M to over \$160M, an increase of approximately 80%. As the CEO of that firm stated:

“We had a strong balance sheet coming into COVID, not everyone did. We were actively looking for opportunities such as distress sales in the hospitality sector. We were able to take advantage of that. More buying opportunities. However, every positive opportunity was from someone else's loss – like other companies failing or lost jobs.”

However, this EDC leader's ability to respond to the pandemic was very much in the minority, as most went into what might best be called “survival mode,” with the emphasis being on protecting their community, their family members, and their staff. Many of the EDC executives interviewed were themselves community members, and the survival of the Elders, their employees, and poor community members was their core concern, including things like mental health. Some of the CEOs stated:

“[...] and keeping everybody safe that is the other one it has always been my priority. I have a couple of high-risk staff members, and that is number one, to me, it is more, more than anything, nothing happens to them. I do not want to see any of my staff go down with this, perish because of the disease.”

Or,

“So, again, the cultural norm of our operations, for our business enterprises, and safety for elders, both at work and in the community (we do not want Covid) causing impact.”

Industry

Different EDCs suffered during the pandemic, especially those with revenue streams from tourism and casinos. As one CEO stated:

“From a retail perspective, our gaming has been negatively affected in particular, slot machines and VLTs and stuff like that, so that has closed by orders of the government a few times that are actually closed right now. So, that has affected us both revenue wise and with employment.”

Another noted that:

“[...] a lot of our business comes from visitors to the casino and our tourism attractions all basically disappeared, so we saw reduction there. We did see with it's increasing our local business but not enough to a loss from the visitation.”

On Canada's coasts, where Indigenous fisheries have become big business with hundreds of millions in investment going into fishing fleets, processing plants, fishing quotas, as well as fish-farms, one CEO noted that their international sales for specialist products had taken a major hit:

“Seafood did take a hit. This year countries like China and Italy both got hit pretty hard with COVID, early on, and our two biggest or top three biggest export or so, that really took a chunk out of us, for seafood sales, especially lobster and scallops.”

On the northwest coast, the transboundary nature of fish stocks created havoc for Indigenous fisheries with the added burden of cross-border COVID measures added to the already stressful situation of having to deal with American Homeland Security:

“We transport fish from Canada, the fish that are caught on the Canadian side of the US border, and then we transport them to the US. So, we have had an increasing requirement to transport across the border because of Homeland Security. And then COVID-19 came in on top of that. So, there are little layers of, is this Homeland Security? Because, Homeland looked after COVID Homeland terrorist stuff, or is it Homeland

COVID stuff? This is just another regulatory cost that we deal with in our wild fish operations.”

Several participants operated in energy, natural resources, and construction. Participants had mixed experiences on how these impacted their operations, likely because of different provincial regulations and the strategies of large firms they partnered with. Some business experienced major delays and losses in this area.

“[...] industrial services, the same thing there, a lot of projects that we would have been working on, were delayed postponed. And because they had restrictions on their operations in some of the industries mining, oil, and gas, then we were affected with the same thing. We have reduced revenues, reduced profits, and reduced employment.”

“Unfortunately, on the construction side, we saw a decline in the early parts of COVID, which impacted our [contracting] and [construction company]. So that really impacted our sales.”

On the other hand, some businesses experienced growth and considered mining and natural resources to be a secure industry despite the pandemic. However, one acknowledged that they are looking to diversify into renewable energy in order not to be completely reliant on mining, despite their current success.

“[...] our engineering company is still active and doing very well in the Indigenous and mining markets, and environmental markets.”

“The mining sector, again, is one of the safest places to work, and they are fortunate enough that they did very well through COVID. So really, they monitored there, they didn't see very many outbreaks within the mining sector here in [our region], which shows that they're very sustainable. And I think it has to do with their safety programs... In my opinion, the mining sector was probably quite secure.”

Another noted that:

“[...] we need to ensure that the mines can continue to operate without large scale shutdowns because of COVID breakouts within their camps or things like that. If stuff like that happens that really impacts us, it all slows down too. So, a lot of our future planned growth is into the renewable energy sector.”

“Our real estate hasn't really been affected; people are still going to pay their rent and leases, so that's fine. And our energy hasn't changed either; the sun continues to shine, and the wind continues as well. So you're still using energy that hasn't been affected.”

Effectively 70% of the EDCs interviewed in this project reported lower revenue between 2018 and 2021, with losses ranging from 48% to a staggering 102% (a negative revenue position as the EDC paid down debt owing to its Trust).

Pivoting

Some of the most interesting business stories that appeared during the early days of the pandemic were the ability of small firms to pivot production in response to PPE gear such as hand sanitizers or masks and medical gowns.¹⁶

The businesses interviewed in this project showed initiative for adapting their business, however, most businesses in this survey did not pivot their products or services. This might be due to the industries they were in; Industries like gaming and hotels, construction, mining, and energy services were difficult to pivot. Management at these firms were more focused on continuity and adapting their processes to working from home rather than changing their products/services and diversifying their portfolios.

Where change did occur was at the level of internal administration, for example adapting to working from home, adopting new technologies, and changing job roles or expectations. More than anything COVID-19 meant that senior management took on more jobs and responsibility. This may lead to early burn-out for these overworked business leaders, an issue which could be followed up with in a future survey, however, there was no talk of burn-out or mental fatigue by those interviewed, which speaks to a considerable resiliency within the respondent pool.

¹⁶ Laura Taylor, Nicole Bakes and Don Richardson. (2020). “Into the Right Hands: Conjuring a Sanitizer Supply Chain to Indigenous Communities,” *Shared Value Solutions*. <https://info.sharedvaluesolutions.com/blog/hand-sanitizer-supply-chain-to-indigenous-communities>. No locatable pagination.

One CEO with a camp catering company in their portfolio noted that with the almost total shutdown of their mining business clients they found themselves tackling smaller catering opportunities regardless of the size or value of the project. While most said they did not or could not pivot or it was *business as usual*, one CEO did note that their specialized Indigenous clothing manufacturing line went from selling wholesale to e-commerce.

Strengths

The businesses surveyed showed remarkable optimism on many fronts despite the challenges of recent years. When asked about their strengths in handling the pandemic, they offered varied responses converging on a few common themes, such as the ability to adapt. Respondents mentioned that they had been able to maintain their business and continue as usual. Others brought up their communication, ability to cut costs, approach to strategic planning, and sense of community, as demonstrated in Table 04.

Table 04: What are some of your EDC’s strengths in how you handled the events of the past year?

Topic	Number of participants
Adaptation	4
Maintained direction/employment	3
Communication	2
Selling assets/reducing expenses	2
Crisis/continuity/recovery planning	2
Subsidies	2
Look for opportunities	1
Community/sense of family	1

Throughout the interviews, businesses mentioned other approaches and attributes that helped them succeed during the pandemic. Some identified their diverse business assets as a strength during the pandemic. As development corporations, they have the opportunity to participate in many industries, so when one of their subsidiaries was hit hard, another was able to cover the costs. Participants had the following to say regarding their diversified subsidiaries:

“[...] we’ve preached investment diversification from day one for [decades]. We’ve worked hard to have a very diversified portfolio where we’d be engaged in in a bunch of different industries. And at no time 25-year tenure here has it demonstrated itself to be so important than during COVID because, if we were an EDC that just had 80% of our

world invested in the hospitality industry, we would be dead, but we were fortunate that we had a very well diversified investment portfolio."

"Our diversification supported the other company, so we were able to offset."

In addition, another common theme when discussing their strengths was their planning and assessment strategies. Some development corporations already had business plans or assessments in place before the pandemic, while others were able to take a close look at what happened to their organization during the pandemic to learn and create strategies for the future. Those who had plans or had recently evaluated their business felt better positioned to navigate the pandemic, and others learned from the experience.

"We worked pretty diligently for a full year on business continuity and COVID recovery plan. So we got very detailed 160 pages that had basically an emergency response plan and a business continuity plan. Business continuity planning is about everything. It's about our accounting system, HR system, communication, or website."

"The strengths, well, we didn't go on a big holiday like a lot of people did; we just buckled down and looked for opportunities, knowing that there was going to be opportunities, just because there was so much chaos going on."

"We learned a lot. You know I always try and take the experience and say, what can you learn from it? And we learned a lot about our company, and we learned a lot about our individual investments. We learned a lot about some of our strengths, and we learned a lot about some of our weaknesses, so from that standpoint, I think that was something good that came with COVID."

Furthermore, the interview businesses highlighted the sense of community as a significant strength in responding to the pandemic stress. Business adaptability was also highlighted in the interviews, often converging different strategies and procedures to overcome the pandemic challenges.



5. Challenges of the Pandemic

Results: Challenges of the Pandemic

The participant CEOs detailed many of the challenges that they face as a result of COVID-19. The issues that are most pressing range from hiring and attracting employees to competing with government policy. The following sections discuss in more depth some of the most cited responses.

Finding and Retaining Employees

In the first quarter of 2022, the Canadian federal government has announced that Job vacancies climbed to 957,500, the highest quarterly number on record.¹⁷ Notwithstanding all the employer's efforts, businesses have been facing an increasingly tight labor market driven by the lack of workers.

Employment: a growing challenge

The challenge of finding employees increased during the pandemic and was a topic that came up in many interviews. Some of the businesses surveyed were struggling to find human resources even prior to the pandemic and have highlighted the importance of training programs as one of the strategies to attract and retain employees.

There are many reasons for the lack of available workforce for development corporations. During the pandemic there were two different streams of issues related to workforce and employment levels. Some of the issues were a direct cause of the COVID-19 pandemic. Others were simply pre-existing and simply exacerbated by the onset of the 2020 pandemic. Given the impacts of the pandemic, finding employees has been an increasing challenge for development corporations, as quoted:

“Yeah, it's been getting pretty intense because I remember we used to have job ads out for just our convenience store, just gas attendants, and we used to have well over 100 applicants every time we put ads out, and now I got like four. So, employment is a problem.”

¹⁷ Statistics Canada. (June 2022). Job Vacancies, First Quarter 2022. <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/220621/dq220621b-eng.htm>. No locatable pagination.

“We have low population numbers and high barriers to the workforce, you know, through generational trauma. So it definitely amplified that and made it a lot worse.”

“There are few people that aren't working right now. Besides, if they're not working, it's because they are on the Canadian Workers Compensation Board or something like that like they can't physically work. So that labor pool is dramatically shallow.”

Some workers have more childcare responsibilities at home caused by lockdowns and health risks. Other reasons may include illness, restructuring, retirement, and increased workplace risks.

“People that would be able to work are not able to work because they have their kids at home with them; they just don't have childcare. Parents have had to quit their jobs or put their careers on hold just because they have nowhere to put their kids, so that's huge.”

“When this last outbreak happened, everybody lost daycare [...] We didn't have a problem with it, we were all working in the office, but okay, we're going back to home workstations.”

Attracting employees

For remote or northern communities, a small local population makes it difficult to find staff, and the type of work offered may make it difficult to draw employees from abroad (such as staffing a local grocery store or gas bar).

Indigenous people's geographical location limits the labor pool that they can look to when looking for talent to fill open positions. There are many factors contributing to locational disadvantage of Indigenous communities looking to hire, including transportation access problems, harsh climate, and sometimes a lack of amenities that would attract outside employees.¹⁸ These factors put a strain on small Indigenous businesses seeking qualified, retainable employees. This issue existed pre-pandemic but was heightened due to travel

¹⁸ O'Donnell, Susan. (2016). “Digital technology adoption in remote and northern Indigenous communities in Canada.” *Canadian Sociological Association 2016 Annual Conference*. University of Calgary, Calgary, Canada. No locatable pagination.

restrictions and a lack of procurement opportunities which occasionally provide capital for hiring and skills development.

In Indigenous communities, there are gaps in accessibility to education and training programs which would be needed for skilled trades or technical work.

“It's been very tough to keep business running with no staff; we essentially had two core staff, the manager and the head cashier, that stuck around all winter and kept the store running themselves. So that's that has been one of the biggest challenges is just trying to find people to work in this environment.”

“[...] our city is not so bad; it's just the smaller communities; I mean a lot of people would like to focus on the quality of life. You'd like to have organized sports, maybe a swimming pool or go to a theatre, which you obviously don't have in the smaller communities. We have it, so it's a little easier to attract qualified employees, but you know, you don't want to move from Toronto to a town with a population of 100 people and basic services unless you like that outdoor lifestyle.”

Online and in-person work

Another consideration is the digital divide. This is one of the most significant factors contributing to issues surrounding employment within Indigenous communities because as Canada's socioeconomic makeup becomes digitized, the pre-existing connectivity issues faced by Indigenous peoples are becoming amplified. During the pandemic, this transition to the digital era was accelerated with things like work, school, and social connections moving online, making reliable internet a necessity for everyone.¹⁹

However, with Indigenous communities having less reliable internet and connectivity overall, the online shift was a challenge for many. The rural nature of many Indigenous communities means that they lack the advanced infrastructure required to make a seamless transition to the

¹⁹ Abdelaal, N., & Andrey, S. (April 2021). Indigenous and remote communities can't wait any longer for high-speed internet. *First Policy Response*. No locatable pagination.

new digital era.²⁰ Participants also operate in industries where they rely on in-person work. For businesses in rural Canada, the top industries were retail trade (28.6%); agriculture, forestry, fishing and hunting (14.8%); construction (12.5%); manufacturing (12.4%); and wholesale trade (11.1%).

These sentiments were captured by some of our participating respondents:

“We've done some adaptations with around the office space, so we've created online systems where people can work from home. We have internet-based phones here, so you can take your phone with you home. So if you call this office and you click the extension that goes actually to your home.”

“Everything is kind of heavy labor. Cleaning, we do snow removal in the winter, and we do security, which means driving around and going to different places and checking out buildings. Because you can't do that online, all that is very much in person.”

Perceptions of CERB

Five respondents specifically mentioned CERB as a factor in finding employees. This is a challenge identified by other studies, alongside other reasons. In July 2020, a survey by the Canadian Federation of Independent Businesses showed that of the 858 business owners who had staff refuse to return to work, 62% said their staff preferred CERB.²¹ Respondents were also concerned with the physical health of themselves or their loved ones (47%), childcare obligations (27%), believed there were no hours available (16%) and were concerned about public transport (7%).²²

“It's good that the government's taking care of its people, but it's been a negative to job growth because people are sitting at home being paid; why would they go to work, especially if it's in an at-risk or high-risk place like a grocery store in the middle of a

²⁰ Government of Canada. (Aug 2022). Rural Opportunity, National Prosperity: An Economic Development Strategy for Rural Canada. <https://ised-isde.canada.ca/site/rural/en/rural-opportunity-national-prosperity-economic-development-strategy-rural-canada#state>.

²¹ Canadian Federation of Independent Businesses. (July 2020). COVID-19 CFIB Member Survey #16 – Staffing Question Results. <https://www.cfib-fcei.ca/hubfs/legacy/2020-07/COVID19-survey-16-staffing-results.pdf>. Page 7.

²² Ibid, Page 7.

pandemic, nobody wants to do it. So, that's been one of the biggest challenges all around is just staffing.”

“We have more jobs than people; no matter what we put out for ads, we just can't find people to work, which was a problem even before COVID, but now it just got so much worse with the CERB. We need accountants here, we need managers, and you know we're talking about jobs that are over \$80,000, and we still can't find people to fill them.”

“The impacts of some of these social programs that were put in place [was] that made it hard to recruit.”

“[...] our partner wanted to retire and given that it was the pandemic, and people were collecting CERB and stuff like that. I had to advertise for six months to find a new manager, and nobody really was interested.”

Indigenous businesses have previously noted attracting employees with the right qualifications (39%) and retaining employees (30%) as obstacles to their business.²³ In this study, several development corporations perceived CERB to be exacerbating this issue, noting that it had created an extra challenge in filling open positions, although they mentioned other factors, including job risks, health, access to childcare, and lack of training.

Alternative strategies

Faced by challenges to attracting employees brought on by lockdowns, lack of available employees, and remote locations, some businesses took other approaches. One company looked abroad for workers but also faced challenges due to pandemic-related border restrictions. They, and other participants, had to take on more work themselves to continue their operations. Others looked towards training programs to provide opportunities for growth for local Indigenous residents.

“[...] We're in the process of trying to access foreign workers, but they couldn't come into the country [...] It also amplified our troubles with our projects in our monitoring

²³ Canadian Council for Aboriginal Business. (2016). Promise and Prosperity: The 2016 Aboriginal Business Survey. <https://www.ccab.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/CCAB-PP-Report-V2-SQ-Pages.pdf>. Page 31.

equipment because the [our region] doesn't have wind engineers or technicians; nobody up here knows how to do this work. And then COVID came, and they couldn't even come back again. And so we ended up doing a lot of it on our own in the dark, you know, so to speak, and I had to put chains on my pickup truck and tow trucks up to the top of a mountain and install this equipment myself with other people [...] So, I'm the CEO and the laborer, I'm the bookkeeper I'm the box guy, I'm doing all of it."

"There are lots of unemployment, availabilities, and hopefully, some strong strategies can be put together to fill those positions with indigenous workers. I know the federal government is very focused on bringing in foreign workers, but I think they're overlooking a workforce right there."

"We started the year out opening the hotel with training programs to get our members and Indigenous people in [our region] trained in the hospitality industry. Not just the entry-level jobs, but in the management positions too, so we can have people at all levels. I think training is key, and then there are specific support programs that we also take advantage to help support those first hirings; internships and summer student programs and things like that."

In some First Nation communities, a historically complicated scenario was aggravated by the challenges of the pandemic. Considering the remote location of many EDCs, the prominence of industries that rely on in-person work, and the short or complete absence of provincial strategies regarding labor retention and training, it is no surprise that the pandemic aggravated the existing challenges in finding employees.

Further efforts to develop accessible workforce training programs, employment strategies, regional digital infrastructure, and effective regional public policies will be essential to ensuring the social and economic well-being of Indigenous communities and businesses.

Costs of Doing Business

During the pandemic, the general business cost increased because of several factors such as the fuel price rise, supply chain issues, and procurement. Regardless of the sector or business size, they are widely connected with many suppliers and, in some cases, deeply dependent on specific products or services.

In addition, the struggling supply chain has demanded changes and adaptation to the new reality, where products and services were reduced, costs raised, revenues declined, and business accountability increased, as noted:

“[...] not be able to ship to wholesalers you know there are big impacts. We can't get our inventory, and our factories are making, but there's such a backlog. We had problems with the containerships to get our inventory, so then we're out of a lot of stuff, and then can't get it from the wholesalers, delays, and stuff like that becomes a challenge.”

Improvements such as adding new technologies or simple process adjustments can demand significant investments, especially for remote businesses. Regardless of the available funding options, being eligible and adapting remains challenging:

“The pandemic has been costly. The cost of some implementations, for sure in some areas, it cost us some money to implement the new technology to have remote workstations, laptops, things like that, we've had to pay for these things.”

“[...] there's been a loss of revenue on the resource side, we haven't been shut down for two years, obviously, but tour buses can't come to Canada, so that's been a real whack for us.”

Community Relationships

As the COVID-19 pandemic progresses, it continues to have a significant impact on the relationships EDCs maintain within their Indigenous communities. While, in many ways, the pandemic has frayed relationships within Indigenous communities by adding additional challenges and exacerbating existing ones, it has also been a key factor in the mobilization of Indigenous resilience. This can be represented by the EDCs that have worked to manage the fluxes of changing pandemic policy and COVID-19 case counts. Throughout the interviews with EDCs conducted for this project there were two parallel stories being told: one focused on their struggles, and another on their resolve.

One of the ways EDCs and the communities they represent banded together during the COVID-19 pandemic was demonstrated by the development of their own internal COVID-19 safety protocols. Many of the respondents indicated that on top of the COVID safety protocols implemented by the federal and provincial governments, they also managed to draft outbreak plans and other sanitization practices.

Some of the respondents took the time to describe some of the ways they addressed the pandemic internally within the community:

“[...] But while still trying to keep the businesses going based on the visitation. So, we set up our own internal pandemic response committee to try and deal with keeping the community members safe while trying to commit and keep essential services going and things like that.”

“[...] We have a community emergency response team called the CERT, and I'm a member of it for [my community]. From the beginning of the pandemic through last summer (Summer 2020), we would meet every Thursday with the RCMP, the health college like everybody in the community would come together.”

In collaboration with the community, the EDCs worked to keep their members safe by purchasing and encouraging the use of personal protective equipment, increasing testing/stringent isolation protocols, and working to educate the community about sanitization and symptoms.

The community and the EDCs tended to partner together to formulate a response plan that was tailored to the community's needs. A few of the respondents felt that the protocols introduced by the federal and provincial governments did not effectively address the unique situation of Indigenous Peoples facing COVID. This resulted in the community collaborating with their development corporations to have targeted responses to the changing and unknown nature of the COVID-19 pandemic. Many EDC respondents alluded to the fact that their labor pool is their community; therefore, working towards protecting the health of the public in their region was a task many participants undertook via their development corporation.

Other examples of this were captured by a description of community COVID protocols provided by participating EDCs:

“[...] We established our own pandemic law so that we didn't have to rely on protocols that came down from the province, we inserted our jurisdiction and said if we feel we need to put some measures in place, we're going to honor our own law. It was a lot of work into that by everybody.”

“[...] like I said, I've taken on two other jobs. But I think just like for COVID-19, we have a community control group. So basically, we meet like three times a week, and it's just to keep up with the policies regarding COVID-19. So, whether it's out of the province, district or the country, we keep everybody in the loop and address it because it changes so much.”

The EDC respondents also indicated that during the pandemic, they were increasingly collaborating with communities within their region but also expanding to new horizons and exploring new opportunities. Within their regions, EDCs continued to partner with communities to address employment-related issues. Some participants mentioned that as the pandemic progressed and continued to threaten stable employment for the community, they used their EDC to promote things like hiring and training youth to fill the gaps in weakened labor pools. Also, some participants mentioned that part of this focus on employing youth was part of a broader framework to collaborate with the community to reorient hiring on capacity building and skills training.

Many EDC respondents recognize the difficulties of acquiring highly skilled and highly educated employees for their organization. They have attempted to counteract this by focusing on curating training and mentoring a generation of Indigenous youth that can learn and subsequently work in their communities. With the pandemic starting to slow down, one EDC respondent mentioned that tourism and hospitality is a sector that is seeing a high influx of Indigenous youth getting their start in the workforce:

“[...] a lot of young people in the hospitality industry are having their first work experience, and it's a way to get involved into the workforce, so hopefully that's one of the positive results that can come from this.”

“[...] I really enjoyed that business continuity process. I think that a lot of development corps and First Nations really, really need to figure out both capacity and skill sets and get out of the mindset of just hiring because of their abandonment.”

Another example of collaboration amongst communities via EDCs was captured by one response which mentioned that their EDC partnerships have expanded past their local First Nation community and have started to collaborate more frequently with Metis communities outside of their region:

“[...] I guess one of the major things in terms of new business is more collaboration since 2018. We've been working with all the indigenous communities, not only [our First Nation] but all First Nations, along with the regional corporation and the Metis communities.”

This example indicates that EDCs not only have the capacity for successful development within their localized communities, but they can also work to bridge the gap and build connections nation-to-nation. These two aspects of EDCs and their communities reinforce the notion that

these organizations are beacons of progress and physical representations of thriving Indigenous economies and communities even during times of uncertainty brought on by the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic

While the participant EDCs in this project have found ways to effectively collaborate and include their local communities, this has not been without challenges. One of the main hurdles discussed in the interviews with the EDCs related to community relationships was the process of changing leadership during a health crisis.

Several of the EDC respondents mentioned that the communities they are associated with underwent elections or a change in leadership during the pandemic, which put a strain not only on the community but also on the business operations and functions of the EDC:

“[...] The council election was put off until October, and then we got a new chief and lockdowns; it was challenging. So that created a communication issue between our board and the Chief and Council because it’s new chief, some of them are the same, but there are new players.”

“[...] the only thing that happened that wasn't good is that there was an election. Elections all got put off and then there was an election that ended up, it was supposed to be in in May and then it got delayed.”

One respondent described a situation where there was a change in leadership resulting in the EDC needing to slow down business operations to develop a functioning relationship with the new leadership:

“[...] Yeah, rebuilding relationships with the new chief is important for Dev Corps.”

EDCs run in partnerships by multiple communities felt their own challenges:

“So, one of the challenges we're encountering, pretty much from the get-go is, you know, several heads. And each of these communities has a Chief and Council, who are decision-makers, for them to relinquish any degree of that decision-making authority has already been a challenge.”

While these sorts of administrative changes are regular occurrences within the communities, there was an added layer of difficulty posed by COVID-19 protocols, which limited in-person meetings. The lack of in-person interactions was one of the most widely cited difficulties by the participant EDCs:

“The leadership group that is expiring in one week chose not to abide by that for three years. So COVID did not have an impact on that. But COVID-19 was used as a reason not to meet. And so, I guess in a way, they have an impact. In addition, the leadership group at the First Nation chose to go hardcore lockdown, like locking the office doors. Don't let anybody in.”

Broader Impacts

Concerning the broader impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on EDCs that participated in this project, it was worth noting that many of the things they mentioned coincide with existing issues that Indigenous communities experience and were not always directly related to the pandemic. One of the impacts on respondent organizations that was a direct result of the pandemic was the closure of businesses and an uncertain future economic outlook.

Many participants mentioned that they had to close businesses within their development corporation portfolio or experienced significantly reduced revenues because of pandemic policies and an increase COVID cases:

“We're very flexible. So, some things had remained the same, I said, two staff that was in the office but even in the office, once the offices were closed it was by appointment only when you came in, you had to wear a mask, you had to use the sanitizing lotion and that kind of stuff.”

“[...] Yeah, and a good percentage of the people had done that. So, we felt relatively safe; we had hardly any cases. Unfortunately, over the last two weeks, we've had a surge, and we went from having maybe 15 cases from the beginning of the pandemic to suddenly, now we have 100 active cases.”

Several of the EDC respondents expressed the most concern about the portions of the business portfolio that rely on the tourism industry. Across Canada, the tourism industry was one of the worst hit due to pandemic regulations that limited travel. EDC respondents with businesses that relied on a steady supply of travelers expressed concern that many of these businesses that were forced to shut down temporarily may never fully recover. COVID outbreaks, staff illnesses, and ever-changing pandemic safety guidelines have shaken the confidence of this sector amongst the EDC respondents:

“It's been negative for us. Obviously, especially in our tourism businesses, the protocols required us to close some of our businesses for a certain period of time. So, the result was reduced overall traffic, which then equaled reduced revenues and reduced profits.”

And we had quite a few layoffs due to the businesses having to close, and that was negative for the impacts on us.”

Another impact on EDCs directly tied to the COVID-19 pandemic is the transition to virtual work practices. The transition to a virtual work environment received mixed reviews from the EDC participants. While some of the respondents have a somewhat positive outlook on the possibilities related to moving business online, others were less confident in the success of this business framework. Some of the positive mentions from the respondents included benefits such as being able to connect with partners outside their region easier or boosting the overall cohesiveness of their work team. This respondent organization found that the transition to virtual work has boosted trust amongst her team members because they are able to have more personalized work experiences:

“I’ll say, that’s been very positive. And then again, the ability to work from home, I think, has also helped create more of a cohesive team within my core staff at the Dev Corp. I’ve gained a lot of trust in them. When people start working at home, you really see their true colours. It’s really helped to show me what my core staff are made of and their dedication and it’s helped make us a much stronger and tighter team.”

Contrary to this experience with the virtual shift, other respondents describe a situation that illustrates virtual work as a hindrance to business operations. Some participants' concerns were that conducting business virtually does not lend itself to effective or meaningful relationship development and has proved detrimental to business operations in the long term. This impersonality, coupled with the cost of implementing new technology, has proved to be a significant barrier for these respondent organizations:

[...] There are some things you can do over zoom very well, or over the telephone very well and there are other things you can’t. Discipline is difficult over zoom; negotiating things over zoom, and giving technical instructions were very difficult to do over zoom. So there was lots of things that were more difficult to do when you couldn’t physically be together. And so, that impacted efficiency and productivity.”

Outside of impacts brought on by the outbreak of COVID-19, many of the EDC respondents indicated that the pandemic only worked to heighten the existence of systemic and socioeconomic issues already present within Indigenous communities. During the pandemic, the EDC participants noted a decline in the general well-being and quality of life of many of their employees and the surrounding community:

[...] There's a little bit of fuel a little bit of groceries, the grocery store's struggle. The hotel's struggle. You know, it's a hand to mouth existence in a remote community.

Amongst their interviews, the EDCs also stated that “making ends meet” simply became more difficult during the pandemic leading to an increased prevalence of issues like alcoholism, financial instability, and joblessness:

[...] we've seen, you know some of our good top staff members that show up to work every day slide down a road of alcohol and all that stuff and it's been very challenging to try to operate an essential service, like the store and it's the only store the only gas station, the only bank and postal outlet in the community.

While the EDCs recognize that the governments are trying to combat these issues as part of a larger COVID relief strategy, they feel that these issues will continue to be inadequately addressed in a post-pandemic world.

One respondent described the long-term approach that is required to address not only the issues brought on by the pandemic but also the systemic inadequacies long plaguing Indigenous economies and communities:

“We need to undo the societal damage that Canada has perpetrated on Indigenous people for centuries [...] a lot of the healing is in First Nations communities, but a lot of the healing is not in the First Nations; it is in the society, writ large, where people don't even understand or won't accept that there are these systemic problems in our society, and without dealing with them”

In addition:

“We, as First Nations, need to figure out a way to work together. You know, there are so many people doing the right thing around us, be the Hutterites or the Amish or, or other groups that create multimillion dollar operations from an agricultural perspective and done very well with smaller pieces of land, so you know we got millions and millions of acres of land that are ours, not only in our traditional territory but our actual reserve lands and, and we're still a poor people. [...] we're trying to be sustainable about the long-term generational wealth. “



6. Recovery

Results: Recovery

Barriers

The survey also asked the participants about their perspective on recovery and the major barriers they see related to getting their businesses back up and running. Echoed throughout the respondents' answers was a level of uncertainty surrounding the return to a pre-pandemic sense of normalcy. However, several participating CEOs spoke about a return to normal pre-COVID business operations:

“Government restrictions – we keep saying things will open but then we move back. It will be dependent on when we can get back to normal.”

This is especially the case for those EDCs that have invested in tourism and gaming with portfolios containing hotels and golf courses or plans for these in the future. They need to return to an open economy with high customer turnover, unrestricted travel, and open borders. There really is no other business model that they can pivot upon, with one respondent mentioning:

“The biggest barriers will be the industries we are in and how long they will take to turn. When people travel more, the hotels will fill up; when there’s hockey tournaments and concerts, the hotels will rebound. The biggest barrier will be time and returning to normal.”

Several participants laid the blame for tighter labor markets on the government’s response to COVID-19, which included offering living wage supports. However, most were very empathic to the circumstances of their workforce, especially their Indigenous community members.

Some respondents did express concern that the high debt levels will lead to reduced funding for Indigenous businesses as the government may reduce programming for Indigenous organizations as part of a larger fiscal recuperation.

“Just returning the companies back to profitability. Getting back dollar wise to where they need to be, employment-wise. And that might require us to continue to adapt the business to whatever the new worlds is. And that’s fine, we’ll make it, we’ll make the adjustments, adaptations, but we do need those companies get back there, because we do want to make sure our community continues to have the resources and the funds to be able to do their programming and so on.”

Most of our participants noted that they had undertaken some level of business planning and repositioning through the pandemic as they attempted to reorient their corporations moving forward. Some of these were very extensive, and one CEO noted they had developed a 160-page emergency response plan for reorganizing the firm during COVID.

Equally, they stated that they need funding support from governments to plan and research how to restructure existing firms and initiate new business opportunities. They agreed that they lacked the financial resources and staff resources to manage these planning exercises and that capital equity coming out of the pandemic was exhausted.

Many mentioned that they used outside consultants, lawyers, accountants, and other professionals to develop their plans. These strategic response plans consisted of community consultations and interviews. Other participants described the contracted labor problem but recognized that the challenges were also internal.

They noted that *lateral violence* was still an issue in the communities, as well as low self-esteem, byproducts of the residential school system, and a far too great dependency on the welfare state. This CEO also noted that Canada needs to emphasize working around an economy instead of social programming. The First Nations need to break the dependency on welfare. In response to what they need to recover, a CEO respondent stated:

“We need to undo the societal damage that Canada has done to the communities. Healing needs to happen on all sorts of levels and needs a major mindset change. A sizeable portion of the population needs to learn they are good human beings and that they have potential and skills.”

Clearly, this speaks to the need to work with the communities to harness the young Indigenous labour force in a positive manner, to engage them in a dialogue around education, labour market opportunities and the need for them to participate in rebuilding their communities – “*training, funding, and hiring,*” as one respondent neatly summarized.

While labor shortages should resolve themselves as the pandemic is brought under control due to increased vaccination levels, wage support programs alleviate the mismatch between available employment and the skills required, EDCs still struggle with shortages amongst their labor pools. Education and skills/training programs are still required, but other “life skills” often must be learned in a formal setting alongside the undoing of the colonial regime that has

plagued Indigenous Peoples. This scenario is behind CEO calls for the return of the temporary foreign worker program.

"[...] the government has a design framework that will teach people how to do this or that, carpenter machinist electrician, whatever. And it doesn't meet people where they're at. They need to believe in themselves."

However, the one issue that EDC CEOs agree about is capital/equity and funding guarantees. The recovery is dependent upon access to capital, and as one CEO stated, reserve communities have no money and often no jobs either:

"Access to capital (pre-pandemic and post-pandemic) is a huge issue in Indigenous Canada as a whole and for all EDCs. With [one of our projects], it is hard for them to maintain equity when they have no access to capital. Most reserves have no money. We need for some kind of loan guarantee to allow Indigenous people to truly participate in the economy."

"We're looking obviously to increase our revenues and. And along with that, it's creating jobs, creating employment. And as I said earlier, it is to look at stimulating the economy here, the growth and creating that stability and the community so it's a huge job. So many, so many different components to that."

It is important to dedicate some discussion to the ways in which the EDC respondents shifted their business during the pandemic and what their business and economic development portfolio looks like in the recovery phase. While many of the development corporations were required to put their major business operations on hold during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, many of them have taken the initiative to regain momentum and rebuild their portfolios in some unique ways.

Through desk research, we revisited the EDCs that participated in the initial interview phase of the project to check in on them and see what their business focuses have been since our last interactions. One key trend that was illustrated by many of the EDCs was an increased focus on projects and initiatives that promote sectoral sustainability. For example, one of the industries in Canada that are being repositioned to be more sustainable is the forestry sector. A few of the subsidiary organizations tied to a respondent EDCs have embraced sustainable forestry initiatives which are based on principles that promote sustainable forest management, including measures to protect water quality, biodiversity, wildlife habitat, species at risk, and forests with exceptional conservation value.

As the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted issues related to supply chains energy consumption, and a general downturn in the viability of traditionally successful sectors of the economy, businesses have been forced to consider sustainable or renewable options as a means of growing their operational portfolio.

As renewable energy becomes one of the fastest growing sectors of the Canadian economy, some of the EDC respondents have diversified their business portfolios to be centered on this new horizon of economic development. One of the respondent EDCs subsidiary organizations has started to engage with solar energy, sustainable lumber harvesting, and working with the community to plan more energy-efficient methods of powering homes. To move away from community reliance on gas and oil-powered generators, this development corporation is working towards providing alternative means of energy production.

They have also established initiatives that are retrofitting homes in the community with more energy-efficient appliances and working on fixing structural inadequacies that contribute to waste. As the pandemic forced people to remain in their homes for extended periods of time many people experienced a surge in the cost of amenities due to increased use.

[Looking ahead: priorities for the next year](#)

The top priority for the next year is to expand their businesses, grow their revenues and profits, create jobs, and support their communities. Acknowledging the challenges of the past year, participants are eager to return to and exceed their normal business proceedings. Table 07 provides a breakdown of respondents’ priorities.

Table 07: What are the EDC’s top priorities for the next 12 months?	
Priority	Number of participants
New businesses/partnerships/ assets	5
Increase revenues/profits	4
Creating Jobs/Employment	4
Stimulate economy/support community	4
Creating long term strategy	3
Adjust/adapt	2
Improve leadership	1
Build relationship with chief and council	1



7. Conclusion

Conclusion

Considering the research's main objective, developing a comprehensive understanding of how COVID-19 has impacted indigenous businesses, the outcome of this report brought up a reality where indigenous companies are facing considerable adversities.

Within our sample, the prioritization of health and safety of staff was a common theme, almost without exception. CEOs stressed the long-term health and safety of their employees and their communities over financial gain. Senior managers moved into front-line positions to ensure that community firms' vital services were covered. One CEO recounted driving to install equipment himself and even clearing ice from a road because there was no one else to do it. Another participant took on tasks at all levels of his organization, filling in for staff who were homesick or vacant positions, and other participants mentioned stepping up to keep the company running in similar ways. Another senior business manager volunteered to manage the office of another remote community, as the staff and council were too sick to come to work even to print the welfare cheques.²⁴

There are countless selfless acts that could be recounted across Canada as First Nations EDC staff pitched in to assist their communities; these are just two examples.

Participants were concerned about the well-being of the community and their employees and were aware of people's difficulties. Issues like illness, at-risk family members, increased needs for childcare and other caregiving work, lack of generational wealth, and generational trauma were brought up by the interviewees, and they tried to continue their operations to alleviate some of these challenges.

The EDC staff clearly responded quickly, and in most cases effectively, to the COVID-19 pandemic despite there being no playbook provided for them on how to manage businesses during a pandemic. It is apparent that they did not use COVID-19 as an excuse to close their businesses or take time off. Some effectively transitioned to working at home, using e-commerce and e-communications tools to continue to operate their businesses and protect their corporate assets.

²⁴ Personal correspondence with Greg Finnegan, 2020, 2021.

A few thrived during COVID-19, increasing their revenue and growing their assets by buying distressed businesses. However, this was not the case for all participants or necessarily representative of the experiences of Indigenous-owned companies, communities, and development corporations during the pandemic. Many were pleased with the flexibility offered by remote work, which allowed their staff to stay safe and care for their families.

However, the changing landscape of remote work will present challenges for Indigenous businesses since reserves and remote communities disproportionately lack access to reliable internet. This scenario will be an ongoing challenge in the coming years. Several participants credited their diversified industries as a factor in getting through the pandemic; this allowed them to adapt to changes in employment and revenues when industries like tourism were closed.

Alongside diversification and adaptation, another theme was planning and evaluation. Participants mentioned looking for opportunities and reviewing the state of their assets in a rapidly changing landscape. Those who made big moves (selling subsidiaries, acquiring new businesses, investing) felt that this was a crucial part of their success. Some had put serious effort into reviewing and planning for the long term, and a thorough knowledge of their subsidiaries and overall business structure proved essential for making good business decisions.

A significant challenge during the pandemic was hiring, a prominent theme in nearly every interview. There simply were not enough people to fill vacant or new roles in the EDCs and their subsidiaries. Participants noted difficulty attracting people with the expertise required for specific positions in remote or northern areas. Some mentioned a lack of amenities that can be found in larger cities which made it difficult to attract people from the rest of the country. Additionally, pandemic restrictions meant they could not bring in foreign workers that they usually rely on. Respondents felt that CERB contributed to the challenging situation, with several noting that roles like a cashier or gas bar attendant were proving challenging to fill.

Others said that everyone in their community is working or are unable to work, resulting in ongoing vacancies at their company. One organization mentioned they have a training program in place for a new business that will be opening soon, which will prepare people for entry and management roles. With the ongoing challenges of employment, access to professional development and training programs like this can have a positive impact for communities and businesses, as they provide skills, long term employment opportunities, and a larger labor pool.

In this scenario, many respondent EDCs, upwards of 70% in our sample and 73% in a national survey completed by CCAB, saw their revenues drop precipitously and even closed businesses.

At the same time, they struggled to manage under the burden of COVID-19 and the lockdowns required to keep the population safe until mass vaccination campaigns began.²⁵

Some EDC participants took time to speak about how the normalcy of life in their nation changed due to the pandemic and how they collaborated with the community to respond to some of the issues posed by COVID-19. The reliance on each other and the relationships established during times of uncertainty during the pandemic have worked to strengthen the bond between Indigenous development corporations and the community that they serve.

The data collected from this research is valuable because it illustrates two important economic landscapes related to Indigenous economies in Canada. On the one hand, the findings highlight the resilience and opportunity for prosperity associated with Indigenous economic development corporations. Parallel to this, the data also reiterated some of the pre-existing socio-economic issues within Indigenous communities which have become aggravated during the pandemic. Problems like employment and employee retention were exacerbated, reflected by CCAB national survey, which found that almost half (48%) of Indigenous businesses laid off staff either temporarily (33%) or permanently due to the pandemic (15%), while only 11% hired new staff.

Many of the issues that our respondents alluded to were not new barriers resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic, rather the culmination of years of negligence towards these issues which came to a disastrous climax in 2020. Consequently, the pandemic has created a new business environment, changed business practices, and trained a new generation of Indigenous businesspeople in, if nothing else, risk management while clearly drawing upon a solid empathetic core that is central to Indigenous culture.

In order to move forward equitably in the coming years, progress must be made in terms of employment and skills development, digital access. EDCs and Indigenous businesses can benefit from improved crisis planning and strategic planning for Indigenous businesses and building a diverse array of partnerships and assets.

²⁵ Canadian Council for Aboriginal Business. (2021). "Covid-19 Indigenous Business Survey, Phase 2." <https://www.ccab.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/Covid-Phase-2-report-FINAL-Jun14.pdf>. Page 2.



8. Recommendations

Recommendations

This study focused on exploring how the pandemic has impacted development corporations by surveying EDCs after a long pandemic period. The methodology applied and research questions were satisfactorily answered and concatenated to support the present recommendations, which converged inquietudes such as: How have First Nation economic development corporations weathered pandemic-related economic uncertainty? How are these EDCs preparing for the era of post-pandemic recovery?

Based on the findings from this study, CCAB makes the following recommendations to ensure Indigenous businesses are strategically prepared to overcome the singular scenario included in Canada's equitable economic recovery:

Continued research on AEDCs and Indigenous economies.

The data collected for this report represents a valuable foundation for understanding EDCs and their reaction to the outbreak of COVID-19, but there is more work to be done. As EDCs work to recover from the devastating effects of the COVID-19 pandemic they will still need to overcome barriers that will test their resiliency and resolve. Many of the challenges that were cited by participants were not born in 2020, simply exacerbated. Work will need to be done to better understand the needs of EDCs and the communities they represent so that best practices can be developed. EDCs are not only interesting business case studies with vast portfolios touching a plethora of sectors, but they are a driving force in the Indigenous economy and can be a great starting place for the long process of economic reconciliation. The relationship that EDCs have with Indigenous communities should not be overlooked by government or corporate entities looking to meaningfully engage with Indigenous economies as an act of reconciling.

Increase support and capacity to improve access to funding.

Based on the findings, financial assistance remains a pressing need for Indigenous businesses. Half of the EDCs applied for COVID-related funding at the provincial or territorial level of government, but most businesses that accessed COVID-related funding said that the money they received was helpful but fell short of their larger funding needs. Those denied funding support lacked the financial records required to meet government approval, specifically, not being able to prove revenue from the prior fiscal year which speaks to auditing and accounting challenges. In addition, funding should be designed for the unique needs of different Indigenous identity groups. As a strategic recommendation, governments and financial lenders should recognize the EDC's business specificities for an equitable economic recovery based on its singularities.

Encourage digital transformation and innovation.

Our study and others have identified a digital economy as playing a major role during the pandemic. In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, EDC's businesses and other organizations have had to make significant changes to their operations, one such change being adapting to remote work and the challenges presented by COVID-19 lockdowns and restrictions. The EDCs had to be innovative, and many were able to adapt to these new circumstances through introducing remote work.

While most of participants were able to get by working remotely, Indigenous communities are hindered by a lack of digital connectivity, which creates a barrier to economic success. Particularly with the growth of online business and the ongoing reliance on remote work, if Indigenous businesses do not have the same connectivity, there will be significant barriers moving forward. In response, the EDCs can encourage innovation by investing in new technologies to improve business, decreasing costs, fast adapting, and increasing market participation. In parallel, government and Industry should work to develop partnerships and strategies to facilitate Indigenous connectivity.

Invest time and effort into evaluation and strategic planning.

Planning and evaluation were mentioned as one of the tools to overcome the pandemic. Those of our participants who had undertaken some level of long term, strategic, or business planning and repositioning before the pandemic noted that this was a part of their success. Others began evaluations during the pandemic. In both situations, they felt better prepared to make quick decisions because they had thoroughly evaluated their business assets and knew their strengths and weaknesses as an organization. Looking critically and creating a plan meant they were able to adapt and reorient their corporations moving forward. EDCs can position themselves better for other challenges, and for better decision making in general by investing in evaluation and long-term planning.

Develop strategies to expand mentorship and training opportunities.

Our findings indicate the current Indigenous training landscape does not sufficiently meet the needs and the specificities of Indigenous communities and the strategies should be improved. It is essential to remember that Indigenous businesses and communities are not on a level playing field with other companies, and finding skilled Indigenous staff was challenging even before COVID. These challenges have been exacerbated during the pandemic and finding or retaining employees was reported to be a growing problem.

In addition, most of the surveyed businesses struggled to find skilled workers even before the pandemic and have highlighted the importance of investing in and developing mentorship, employment, and training programs as one of the strategies to attract and retain employees. The training and hiring process should be developed in partnership with Indigenous communities to determine culturally appropriate and comfortable ways to hire and retain Indigenous workers.

Accessibility and availability of procurement opportunities

Work must continue to be done to ensure that procurement contracts are accessible and available for EDCs and other Indigenous businesses. Other studies have shown that government procurement, when accessed, is an important source of revenue, employment opportunities, and training opportunities for Indigenous businesses. Procurement and supply chain engagement has also been cited as one of the key methods to achieve economic reconciliation with Indigenous economies in Canada. Larger EDCs are well positioned to take on government contracts due to their higher capacity. However, relatively few of the businesses in this sample participated in federal procurement. Efforts must be made by the federal government to build relationships, improve access, and gain a better understanding of EDC capabilities in order to improve procurement opportunities. Additional research on procurement and related topics is required to ensure that EDCs and Indigenous-owned businesses can equitably participate in economic development.

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