

What might success look like for young Aboriginals?

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The past year has been an eventful one for aboriginal peoples in Canada. The tragedy of violence against aboriginal women has finally been forced onto the national agenda, thanks in large part to the Native Women's Association of Canada's insistent counting of victims. The federal government's attempt at aboriginal education reform failed. Shawn Atleo departed his post as national chief of the Assembly of First Nations soon after. The Idle No More movement remains active.

Looking ahead to 2015, Canadians await the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's final report on the harm caused by the residential school system, while Canadians For a New Partnership, an organization founded by a group of eminent aboriginal and non-aboriginal leaders, seeks to build more constructive collaborations between First Peoples and other Canadians.

These developments represent a mix of backward-looking reckoning and forward-looking aspiration. Both are needed.

Aboriginal grievances are deep and legitimate; they must be addressed. At the same time, guilt or even redress from non-aboriginal Canadians will not do all that's necessary to support aboriginal peoples' individual and collective success in areas such as culture, education, employment and governance.

The 2011 National Household Survey found that there are 1.4 million aboriginal people living in Canada, roughly 4.3 per cent of Canada's total population of about 33 million. This population is younger than average and growing quickly. What might success look like for this large, young population?

Of course, there will be many models and definitions of success. First Nations, Métis and Inuit are diverse and dispersed. Some broad trends are worth noting, however. For most, cities will be home. Urbanization is a global phenomenon and one in which hundreds of thousands of aboriginal households in Canada are participating. Currently, over half of those claiming aboriginal identity in Canada live in cities. Like half of humanity worldwide, aboriginal people see opportunity in the city and are going after it. Although aboriginal peoples are not immigrants to Canada – they have been here for millennia – they are immigrants to cities: According to the Environics Institute's Urban Aboriginal Peoples Study (UAPS), 90 per cent are first or second generation in their city of residence. They say their top priorities are education, providing for their families, fulfilling careers and home ownership. In short, urban aboriginals aspire to the good life in a modern context.

The fact that education is the No. 1 goal tells us that aboriginal people in cities understand very well what's necessary to prepare for economic participation in an ever-changing landscape. Whether they study in resource-related fields and head back out of the city or pursue work in downtown creative economies, advanced education is critical and their priorities reflect this.

Does participating in the life of Canada's diverse cities mean identifying less strongly as aboriginal peoples? Certainly not. Cultural rootedness and confidence are foundations of success; the UAPS found that people who were most confident about their heritage and culture were the most open to engaging with diverse others. Self-knowledge is a platform for self-respect, self-confidence, success and happiness.

The meaning of these findings is not that all is well for aboriginal peoples in Canada. The consequences of four centuries of colonialism, including a recent history of assimilationist policies (the last residential school closed in 1996), will outlive us all. But the Environics Institute research does show that even as aboriginal leaders seek redress for past wrongs – focusing on things like treaties, legal action and the Indian Act – aboriginal individuals and families are simultaneously pursuing well-being and success by their own lights.

Success and empowerment for aboriginal peoples in Canada will come not only from the redress of past wrongs at a legal and institutional level, but also from education, fulfilling careers, cultural vitality, entrepreneurship and strong family and community ties. It's no coincidence that these are the very goals that aboriginal people articulated when we asked them about their experiences, identities, values and aspirations for a better future.