

# **Dancing with Dependencies Where the Pavement Ends: A Comparative Review on Aboriginal Healing and Development**

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## Dancing with Dependencies Where the Pavement Ends: A Comparative Review on Aboriginal Healing and Development

THIS REVIEW ESSAY COMPARES First Nations scholar Wanda Wuttunee's *Living Rhythms: Lessons in Aboriginal Economic Resilience and Vision* (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2004), First Nations lawyer Calvin Helin's *Dances with Dependencies: Indigenous Success through Self-Reliance* (Vancouver: Orca Spirit Publishing and Communication, 2006), and non-Aboriginal journalist Marie Wadden's *Where the Pavement Ends: Canada's Aboriginal Recovery Movement and the Urgent Need for Reconciliation* (Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 2008). Each author uses different case studies of community development and proposes different solutions. They each conclude, however, that sustainable community change and development must be created and owned from within Aboriginal communities, that the federal government's prevailing Aboriginal development policies and practices are ineffective and promote community dependency, and that there are vested interests in keeping Aboriginal communities dependent and dysfunctional. Lastly, there is a shared acknowledgement that there are no quick and easy solutions and that it will likely take several generations before Aboriginal communities heal and become self-sufficient. Each author, though, holds different positions on whether sustainable and culturally appropriate economic development must precede, follow, or be undertaken simultaneously with Aboriginal community-healing measures. Similarly, there is a lack of specificity and consensus as to the nature of government policy reform required. Nevertheless, all three books showcase promising Aboriginal economic and community development case studies that make scholarly contributions to the field of Aboriginal community development and its ties to healing.

Helin argues that Canadian society will soon be forced to deal effectively with Aboriginal community development – if only out of self-interest – or it will face the consequences of a large, and rapidly increasing, Aboriginal population on welfare. He also argues that the detrimental impacts of a rapidly aging non-Aboriginal population on Canada's economy could be mitigated by a skilled and economically self-sufficient Aboriginal population. If something is not done along these lines, Helin maintains, the Canadian government's financial situation will be undermined by a near-simultaneous increase of people drawing pensions and young Aboriginal people accessing welfare services. When compounded by rising health care costs and a shrinking labour force, Helin likens the anticipated outcome of this situation to that of a "demographic tsunami." Since the anticipated consequences in both scenarios will be felt by all Canadians, he argues that addressing the plight of Aboriginal peoples can no longer be understood as strictly an Aboriginal problem and that addressing it is in the best interest of all Canadians (43-61).

Urging a return to Indigenous values as part of the solution, Helin stresses the importance of recognizing and restoring Aboriginal community social interconnections, interdependence, self-reliance, high moral conduct, loyalty, self-sacrifice, and leadership (86). Like Wadden, he argues that the stakeholders involved in the development and reconciliation processes must extend beyond Aboriginal

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communities and government to include private sector partners (236, 238, 262). However, Wadden argues that development should be done at the grassroots level (231) whereas Helin places the onus for community development on the community's leaders and the business sector (261-2). Moreover, compared to Wadden (and Wuttunee), Helin tends to minimize the role of government in facilitating the changes required for Aboriginal self-sustainability: "The crux of the problem is that parties have largely assumed that the whole solution to sorting out Aboriginal woes can be provided for, or solved by, the federal government. There is no question that its policies and programs are important. However, a search for a real solution must begin outside the current dependency mindset" (29). And while Wadden and Wuttunee critique government for not adequately supporting Aboriginal communities at various levels (i.e., resourcing, governance, and servicing) (Wadden, 178 and Wuttunee, 177), Helin urges Aboriginal leaders to challenge this "current dependency mindset" – what he also describes as a "culture of expectancy" – while also asserting that Aboriginal people have to accept that "a remote bureaucracy will *never, never* be able to solve Aboriginal problems. . . . The only thing we have the right to expect is that we are the only people who can solve our problems" (119) (emphasis in original). He also maintains that Aboriginal leaders who see transfer payments and welfare as compensation for historical injuries should consider how these systems have crippled and continue to cripple their communities (104, 107, 120). Identifying this approach as "shaman economics," Helin argues that the "government approach" to Aboriginal economic development not only enforces the continued economic marginalization of Aboriginal communities, but it also keeps them dependent on government subsidies as the sole source of wealth creation (128). The absence of a community business sector prevents government subsidies from being recycled within the community, which in turn undermines any possibility of fostering sustainable and self-generated wealth (132).

Helin sees fundamental problems as well in First Nation-operated businesses. He points to, for instance, the incongruence between tribal government and the private sector motives as the reason for dissuading Aboriginal leadership from developing such businesses. Whereas private businesses must risk their own resources in order to survive, Aboriginal leaders can be seen as risking little in how they manage government funding for economic development. When projects fail, Helin argues, "one of the only solutions repeatedly advanced by many contemporary Aboriginal leaders has been to put out their hands for more government money." Helin urges Aboriginal governments to focus on creating the climate required for developing and sustaining private businesses. Moreover, he stresses that money does not make people happy if it is not earned by doing something fulfilling (107, 131, 121).

While some Aboriginal community cases studies presented by Wuttunee in *Living Rhythms* echo similar concerns (i.e., that politics and business should be kept separate or at least at arms length), she argues that there are some Aboriginal communities that have successfully reconciled these differences by returning to their traditional governance structures and eliminating their dependence on government subsidies through community-controlled economic development (i.e., the Tsuu T'ina Nation and the Toquaht First Nation) (32, 85). In light of these exceptions, Wuttunee suggests that the decision to bind or to separate businesses from political governance should be made exclusively by the community. While such practices are incongruent with mainstream business structures, she considers mainstream economic development

models problematic because they focus almost exclusively on financial gains at the expense of environmental, social, and cultural needs. In her view, all sustainable wealth creation (Aboriginal or otherwise) must be tempered with reasoned and moderated development that takes into account other community needs (i.e., culture and community relations). In doing so, the focus moves away from finding ways to incorporate mainstream business practices within an Aboriginal worldview to that of displacing the false assumption that business and success are inherently defined in similar terms by all Canadians, including Aboriginal people. This in turn creates the needed space, maintains Wuttunee, for Aboriginal communities to incorporate their values and beliefs regarding wealth and development within their economic development strategies. Wuttunee supports her position by using organizational and community examples that highlight promising Aboriginal economic development practices that were developed by and within Aboriginal communities and organizations (i.e., Tribal Council Investment Group and Winnipeg's Aboriginal Center). These examples are used to both critique mainstream conceptions of economic development and to provide economic development alternatives to models founded upon "secular capitalism" (7-20).<sup>1</sup>

Wuttunee utilizes the "Elements of Development" model developed by the First Nation Development Institute in 1997 as an example of the kind of generic, wholistic, and self-evaluative model Aboriginal communities might consider utilizing for developing culturally responsive and sustainable economies.<sup>2</sup> Unlike mainstream business development strategies that are externally developed, this model supports Aboriginal communities in defining their own measures of success and allows them to "register increases in civic participation and proactive decision making, income streams within and around the community, assumptions of responsibility by community members, and various intangibles such as self-esteem and sense of cultural identity" (46). Thus, in addition to commonly used economic development indicators such as job creation, income increases, loans made, people trained, houses built, and goods produced, this model allows Aboriginal communities to add their own indicators in relation to their spiritual, mental, emotional, and physical needs. The result is one where economic development is conceived as the intersection of four major quadrants: spirituality, kinship, personal efficacy and asset control (172-9).<sup>3</sup>

Unlike Wuttunee's and Helin's books, Wadden's *Where the Pavement Ends* focuses primarily on addiction, violence, and mental health issues and it draws on case studies and informal interviews with a wide array of people, including Aboriginal

1 "Secular capitalism" is a form of capitalism that focuses almost exclusively on a limited amount of quantifiable indicators to evaluate development and wealth.

2 First Nation Development Institute (FNDI), *Annual Report* (Fredericksburg, VA: FNDI, 1997).

3 Wuttunee states that kinship refers to the informal economy that exists within communities that is built upon the creation and sharing of goods and services that are rooted in long-standing tradition of reciprocity found in many Aboriginal communities. Personal efficacy includes individual characteristics that are conducive to a form of entrepreneurship that is mindful of preparing future generations to manage and grow the community's economy. Control of assets refers to the community leadership's responsibility and capacity to properly manage the community's land base, infrastructures, and saving accounts among other assets so that current and future generations may benefit from community economic development. And spirituality integrates language and tradition within economic development as a means of balancing the community's economic and social needs (172-6).

community members, service providers, and leaders involved in Aboriginal healing. Of the three books in this review essay, Wadden's work is perhaps the broadest in scope and makes recommendations in a number of different areas because, as she states, the public belief that Aboriginal people are a burden to society is part of the dynamics whereby the "victims are blamed by offenders because, for the most part, the practice of oppression is not just by government, but also by Canadian society" (227). These recommendations point to various aspects of community development: 1) "create a national agency dedicated to comprehensive Aboriginal community economic development that is at arms length from government but initially funded by the former"; 2) "create a broad-based citizens' coalition to support the aspirations of Aboriginal Canadians"; 3) "fund national Aboriginal organizations to launch a process of consultation in communities across the country, with the assistance of addiction experts, that will lead to a firm policy regarding alcohol consumption" (favouring either total abstinence or harm reduction); 4) "develop a national strategy for the prevention and treatment of Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder"; 5) "provide national Aboriginal organizations with the funding to create a public education program warning Aboriginal youth of the dangers of binge drinking"; 6) "honour the commitment made in the Kelowna Accord to end the housing shortage in Aboriginal communities within ten years"; 7) "expand services to treat and prevent childhood sexual abuse in Aboriginal communities"; 8) "provide more opportunities for Aboriginal youth to be mentored and provide more intercultural education for non-Aboriginal teachers and service providers"; 9) "create a coordinated national strategy to reduce the skyrocketing rate of Aboriginal youth suicide"; 10) "increase media coverage of Aboriginal issues"; 11) "make the mental health and addiction needs of Aboriginal people an immediate national priority by improving the delivery of health care"; and 12) "establish a national exchange program between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal youth" (230-43).

Yet while all three authors suggest that some level of government support is required, they lack specificity (in some cases) and consensus regarding the nature, the quantity, and the duration of the government support needed. Wadden's work, in particular, does not put forth a unified argument beyond urging more and better organized government subsidies to support Aboriginal community planning and healing. Unlike Helin, she barely touches upon economic development and when she does one gets the sense that she sees healing as a precursor to sustainable development (200). Helin, on the other hand, argues that healing is not possible under the current socio-economic and political circumstances and this will not change until Aboriginal communities are self-sufficient. He further argues "the current problem is that many indigenous leaders still seem to be stuck in the grieving mode when the time to move on has already come and gone. The tendency is to look only inward at the wreckage from the storm – at the horrendous social pathologies, and the dysfunction that has resulted. Many leaders have made the subtle shift from 'grieving' to 'grievance.' Seemingly mesmerized by the carnage, they continue to ask only one question: 'Who is to blame for this mess?'" According to Helin, this dependency mindset needs to be displaced by more constructive thinking whereby leaders should ask themselves "What pragmatic steps can we take now to make the lives of ordinary indigenous people better?" This includes, says Helin, a practical development program that has a clear strategy, timeline, and measurable goals (166-7).

Wadden argues that an understanding of these problems does not necessarily equate to change nor is economic development and self-sustainability the sole solution. The substance abuse rates of the economically prosperous North West Territories, Wadden notes, is a good example why economic development alone is insufficient. Instead, she argues that desirable and sustainable change can only occur when there is a small group of community members that simultaneously address the community's social, economic, and political needs at the same time as fostering the belief in and a momentum for community change. According to Wadden, Aboriginal development is not possible without social healing (158-60).

Wuttunee takes the middle ground in this matter between Wadden and Helin by suggesting that culturally relevant economic development must support and be supported by community wellness in several ways: kinship (i.e., distribution of wealth and goods, promoting reciprocity, and interdependence); 2) spirituality (which includes an acceptance and an awareness of one's place within the community and the weights of one's actions on the balance of the whole community; 3) the simultaneous promotion of self-sufficiency through personal efficacy (including balancing the interests of the individual with the collective, short- and long-term benefits versus costs, and a focus on living self-government through such things as finding ways to employ and build the capacity of community members in order to reduce external dependency); and 4) asset control (which includes addressing immediate problems with an eye on future generations and returns on investments made – including strategic use of infrastructure purchases, loans, and skill development – that can help break into the markets of off-reserve communities (172-9). But while this model shows promise and congruity with Aboriginal values and experiences, Wuttunee does not elaborate as to where and how the model has been adopted by various Aboriginal communities showcased in her work or how their experiences support her endorsement of this model; instead, she proposes a framework for understanding community development at the very end of the book without making any linkages between it and her examples. Further exploration of how such models could be translated into policy, planning, and implementation would also have helped immensely.

Unlike Helin, Wuttunee considers government support essential – even if she admits that most successes in Aboriginal sustainable development are achieved with minimal or no government support. It is worth noting, though, that most of these Aboriginal communities have access to land and adequate infrastructures – resources that are not readily accessible to all Aboriginal communities. Unlike large urban sprawls that emerged partly from their strategic location (i.e., easy access to resources and a hub between cities), most reserves were situated with the intent of isolating Aboriginal people from the morally reprehensible influences of Euro-Canadian societies. The result is one where Aboriginal communities must overcome significant barriers that challenge the implementation of pro-capitalist economic development initiatives, including simply a lack of development opportunities, while any initiatives must also be balanced against potential adverse socio-cultural impacts. Perhaps this explains in part why Wuttunee suggests that “each community must walk its own path and live its own truth” (186).

Despite some shortcomings, these three works make important contributions to not just Aboriginal development discourses but also to the problem of how to engage in sustainable economic development. They highlight the interconnectedness of



mainstream and Aboriginal Canadian socio-economic conditions and suggest, as Wuttunee notes, that sustainable Aboriginal economic development will “impact the country positively as their potential develops. . . . [Likewise,] they will [continue to] be a drain on resources if social and economic issues are not dealt with effectively” (54).

Still, three important questions remain that require further attention by Aboriginal communities, governments, and scholars alike. The first question is how healthy does a community need to be in order to begin the journey toward self-reliance? The second is what are the minimal economic conditions required for communities to achieve the health needed for such an undertaking? And the third question is how will we recognize when Aboriginal communities are sufficiently healed and ready to become self-sufficient? Wuttunee suggests that the federal government places too much emphasis on short-term measurable economic development to the detriment of recognizing and providing the support required for building and sustaining capacity. Unlike Helin, she does not see a definitive solution to Aboriginal problems but argues that too much focus is currently placed on public spending as opposed to how much profit is made off Aboriginal land and how little of this profit makes its way down from bureaucratic structures mandated to help Aboriginal communities to the communities themselves. Similarly, Wadden suggests that Indian and Northern Affairs’ community development policies function under very similar assumptions as those employed for residential schools. She quotes an Alkali Lake leader, who states: “Living on the reserve is the same as residential school. Nothing has changed. It’s still controlled, but chief and council are the priests and nuns. . . . The principal of the whole thing is the Department of Indian Affairs. When you think about it, it’s the same. You’re still not allowed to go develop any land. You are not allowed to go against the principal’s policies” (82). Not only must this structural discrimination be recognized, but it must be understood that it reflects the need for bureaucracies to justify and sustain their existence. In other words, if self-sufficiency implies that Aboriginal communities no longer require bureaucratic support, one can see why solutions are not likely to come from government and that government has a vested interest in maintaining the status quo. It also explains why government agencies such as the First Nations and Inuit Health Branch are far more resourced than the community organizations with which they work. In fact, notes Wadden, “the needs of Aboriginal communities are routinely traded off to preserve jobs (“full time equivalents”) within the civil service. . . . [Governments] are really investing in their own capacity. They have not replicated that investment in First Nation communities or First Nation organizations” (178). In a similar vein, Wuttunee quotes one Innu community planner who states: “If we succeed and our people are healed, many bureaucrats will lose their jobs” (177).

Whether one chooses to place the onus for change and adaptation on Aboriginal peoples or on the Canadian government, history shows that Canadian society has been slow and resistant to change in its longstanding relationship with Aboriginal peoples. Perhaps the threat of a demographic tsunami will be necessary in order to change non-Aboriginal Canadians’ attitudes towards the plight of Aboriginal people and garnish their support for Aboriginal self-sufficiency (if only out of self-interest). Clearly there are promising ways forward, but is there sufficient will to act on the options articulated in these books? A large part of the problem is that the debate around Aboriginal development has largely excluded the Canadian public. The media and the

government rarely provide the socio-historical context needed for the public to fully understand, contextualize, and work with Aboriginal communities in examining the root causes (and its looming consequences for all Canadians) of the forced dependency and marginalization of Aboriginal people. Without such public awareness, it is unlikely that more academic writing on the matter will be sufficient to muster the political will of government and Aboriginal community leaders to accept the short-term political costs required for long-term sustainable change. What is really needed is a clear strategy for ameliorating and solidifying Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal relations in a manner that is mutually beneficial and sustainable at various levels (economically, socially, and politically). Only then will there be sufficient political will to bring about the changes suggested in these works. As Maggie Hodgson states in Wadden's book: "Healing is not an Aboriginal issue, it's a Canadian issue" (17).

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