

**Aboriginal Voice -
Atlantic Roundtable Summary
of Proceedings**

Halifax, September 21, 2004

Crossing Boundaries

Aboriginal Voice

This report is sponsored by the Atlantic Canada Opportunity Agency (ACOA) under the Atlantic Policy Research Initiative, which provides a vehicle for the analysis of key socio-economic policy issues in

Atlantic Canada. The views expressed in this study do not necessarily reflect the views of ACOA or of the Government of Canada.



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Introduction

The Crossing Boundaries Aboriginal Voice project is a multi-stakeholder process intended to build an understanding about Aboriginal e-government and to provide a national profile for a set of recommendations that are hoped to influence policy and decision-making on the future development of Aboriginal e-government. It was launched in March 2004 with a National Roundtable held in Ottawa that brought together a diverse group of people to develop a “storyline” or framework for Aboriginal e-government. The process includes a series of Regional Roundtables, which are to serve as the consultative basis for bringing forward regional perspectives and new ideas on the themes and opportunities explored at the national session. The Atlantic Roundtable is the first of the Regional Roundtables.

As with the National Roundtable, the Atlantic session brought together a multi-stakeholder group from across Atlantic Canada that included representation from the Aboriginal community, governments, academia, and the private sector. The discussion was structured to move the Aboriginal e-government storyline forward and further develop the emerging Aboriginal e-government themes - with a particular focus on the themes of collaboration and partnership. Collaboration and partnership were identified as key foundation strategies for Aboriginal e-government and Atlantic Canada is particularly well positioned to consider this kind of approach. The discussion at the Atlantic Roundtable produced some ideas and best practices on partnership strategies and models in a number of areas. As well, the participants provided input on the development of recommendations to be taken forward for discussion in the other Aboriginal Voice regional roundtables and ideas for the creation of a network of Aboriginal e-government champions within Atlantic Canada.

This summary focuses on those aspects of the discussion that added to and built on the framework and themes that were set by the National Roundtable. The final Aboriginal Voice report will be a culmination of the inputs from all of the roundtables, as well as any additional mechanisms of engagement, such as the online dialogues, that are being used to facilitate the discussion. The background papers, annotated agenda, a participants list and roundtable presentations for the Atlantic Roundtable can be found at www.crossingboundaries.ca

Aboriginal e-government: An Emerging Framework

Participants were presented with and discussed the vision and framework for Aboriginal e-government that emerged from the National Roundtable. This vision sees information and communications technology (ICT), if it is used in a responsible, inclusive and Aboriginal community/citizen-centered way, as a powerful tool to address critical cultural, economic and social needs of Aboriginal peoples in Canada. Realizing this potential requires tackling the Aboriginal digital divide of connectivity and ensuring that the technology gets used to protect, promote and strengthen the fabric on Aboriginal cultures. We must avoid seeing ICT as a panacea and at the same time recognize that using the technology to its potential will involve a transformation in the way governments, including Aboriginal governments and organizations, will work in the future. Collaboration, partnership and citizen-centered government are all central to this vision.

The framework for Aboriginal e-government that the Roundtable discussed has four major components:

- Improving service delivery by using ICT to close service gaps and modernize Aboriginal service delivery so that it is better tailored to the needs of Aboriginal communities and citizens.
- Making information a public resource by using ITC to provide quality information that will assist Aboriginal people and their communities participate in the knowledge economy, promote their cultural and identity, and more easily access services that are immediately relevant to them.
- Increasing citizen engagement by using ICT to enable Aboriginal citizens to more effectively participate in the governance and decision making processes that affect them,
- Building sustainable capacity by ensuring that Aboriginal governments, organizations and communities have the infrastructure, connectivity, skills and technological capacity to fully develop and sustain all aspects of e-government.

Roundtable participants were asked the following questions: Is the emerging vision and framework adequate to meet the needs and potential of Aboriginal e-government? Where are the most positive impacts and opportunities that exist for Aboriginal e-government? Is the vision of Aboriginal community/Aboriginal citizen-centered e-government the right one?

There was a general consensus that the vision and framework were on the right track, however, participants stressed that in order for e-government to be relevant in an Aboriginal context and for Aboriginal people to play a meaningful role in the development of policy and planning in this area, the concepts of sustainable capacity and culture need to be more fully developed. In terms of culture, while the sharing of culture was considered both a benefit to Aboriginal people and to Canadians as a whole, roundtable participants reiterated the need to protect cultural information and knowledge from appropriation and misuse – there is a need to balance the “openness” of the Internet

with protected and controlled community space. Further, in order to accommodate the oral nature of Aboriginal cultures and language issues, it was suggested that implementation of e-government related services and initiatives would require multi-media capacities.

Participants also confirmed that a community focus is the correct approach and most probably the largest enabler for the success of Aboriginal e-government initiatives. Most important, communities must be empowered to use the technology to meet their own needs as well as to work together on common problems and issues. A community focus is dependant on several factors, the most widely noted being community and political buy-in. The two go hand-in-hand, but having ICT champions who will take on a leadership role within the community is a key factor in success. Ensuring that ICT is fully taken in decision making and community planning processes requires strategic commitment and investment on the part of political leaders in an environment of limited resources and many important competing priorities. The issue of achieving political buy-in is elaborated further below.

1) Improved Service delivery

Roundtable participants focused on three key aspects of using ICT to improve service delivery.

i) Providing Services Online

While Canada may be at forefront of developing e-government service delivery, participants noted that there are not many online services tailored to Aboriginal people, and those that are tend to be federal programs. Many of the Aboriginal services that are currently provided on-line focus on Aboriginal businesses. Some Aboriginal communities, businesses and groups have begun to use the technology to provide services, but this is at an early stage in Atlantic Canada.

Filling service gaps was acknowledged as a key role for ICT, however, it was noted that achieving the necessary economies of scale and capacity may require a more regional approach. The First Nation Help Desk was an example of a regional organization that has evolved to become an important ICT service provider to schools and now has in place a nationally connected video conferencing capacity that can be a community resource for all First Nation communities and organizations across Atlantic Canada. There was a suggestion that this online video conferencing capacity could serve as a larger platform for Aboriginal e-government in Atlantic Canada.

A particularly interesting and dynamic perspective of service delivery also emerged from the discussion. It was noted that online networks allow for the self-generation services. In the case of youth, for example, online help and counselling services have emerged from online networks such as the Aboriginal youth network. Participants saw using the technology to facilitate networking among communities, service providers and staff working in areas such as education and health as a way of driving the emergence of

online services that respond directly to needs in addition to helping people, communities and organizations collaborate on common issues through sharing of best practices and participating in real time problem solving.

ii) Integration of Service Delivery

Because of the dominant role the federal government plays in the funding and provision of services to Aboriginal peoples, there is a real onus on the federal government to take a leadership role in co-ordinating and moving forward an agenda of modernizing service delivery to make services more integrated and seamless. It was noted that many of the barriers to a more seamless approach to Aboriginal e-services results from federal programs and mandates being very fragmented and there being little focus on or investment in Aboriginal service modernization. Aboriginal governments and institutions find themselves having to follow the dictates of departmental programs so they tend to operate in similar silos and they do not have the resources or the control to put new systems into place without the policy and program support of federal departments. Having said this, there was a strong belief that if Aboriginal governments and organizations had greater control and flexibility, they would use technology to better integrate and tailor services to the needs of the community and as a platform for facilitating and coordinating access to both federal and provincial governments.

In order to improve coordination and promote seamless service delivery, participants acknowledged a need to realign programs and policies to better cluster and integrate services. This would also require realigning existing dollars that are currently fragmented by program and sector into a more comprehensive funding base from which to address Aboriginal service delivery priorities. The core idea is one of cross cutting departmental, government and program boundaries to organize governmental services around the needs and priorities of citizens rather than around government and departmental jurisdictions. The longer term vision is to have Aboriginal governments and organizations, which operate closest to the community, become the pivotal point for integrating service delivery and creating the online platforms that will support access to services. The e-service strategies of the federal and provincial governments should be designed to support this goal.

iii) A Community Centred Approach to Service Delivery

Participants saw political engagement as a key aspect of a community centred approach to service delivery. Policies drive process and policy development requires political engagement. In order to bridge the disconnect between those within Aboriginal communities that have already taken up use of ICT – youth, program managers, economic development officers – and those that have not, political buy-in at the community level is required. It was felt that demonstration of ICT applications, particularly in areas of primary concern to Aboriginal leaders – housing, education, social service – would be the most influential method of achieving political buy-in. Providing technology based services that are targeted on critical needs, tele-health and language programs in schools, were two examples highlighted in presentations, help build

awareness within Aboriginal organizations and change the “culture” of organizations to think about how to incorporate ICT in their service delivery models. The goal has to be to determine how ICT can be used optimally in and across every service situation because that will ultimately generate the synergies and capacities to make Aboriginal e-government sustainable at a community level. Increasing awareness of ICT solutions and understanding of how they can be used among Aboriginal decision-makers will create champions for the use of ICT, not just among youth, who are already comfortable and familiar with ICT, but also among the present leaders of Aboriginal communities.

Participants urged that communities be empowered to develop their own ICT strategies, so that these strategies meet their particular needs and drive government investment. The use of comprehensive community planning was identified as one way to facilitate communities developing integrated technology plans. Producing such plans was seen as serving an educational function in addition to providing the business case for ICT strategic investments and a more integrated approach to the use of ICT resources. Putting ICT community planning tools and training in place was identified as a possible candidate for a region wide effort.

It was acknowledged that implementing an integrated community ICT planning model would necessitate increased community technology infrastructure, capacity and funding. Participants felt there could be a real payback if done correctly because these initiatives could generate savings that could be reinvested in program improvements. Reduction in travel expenditures was one high costs area identified. Reducing travel through the use of video conferencing technology would have the added benefit of enabling political leaders and program staff to spend more time on community problems and service issues.

2) Information as a Public Resource

The issue of making information more of a resource for Aboriginal citizens, communities, governments and organizations was not discussed extensively at the Roundtable. There was acknowledgement that having high quality, relevant information available would greatly Aboriginal governments and organizations in their planning. Information deficits are so large at this point for most Aboriginal communities and organizations and the costs of turning this situation around are so high that sharing information and best practices makes sense as a priority at least in the short term. How to create reliable, relevant, high quality Aboriginal information is a major issue and will need a focused and sustained effort over the long run to turn things around. It was noted that federal and provincial governments have a major stake in this information agenda because they cannot do an effective job of policy planning and reporting to Canadians without good, readily accessible data.

3) Citizen Engagement

While the concept of governments engaging more directly and fully with their citizens in meaningful ways was strongly endorsed at the National Roundtable, Atlantic participants questioned the concept of citizen engagement in the context of small Aboriginal

communities. Participants agreed that, in part due to the size and location of Aboriginal communities, Aboriginal political processes are very family oriented - you vote for people because you know them or you are related. While mechanisms such as online consultations, online surveys and e-voting may increase the Aboriginal citizens' role in the political life at a national or provincial level or in the public policy process, it was noted that simply getting a political platform on paper would be a big step in some Aboriginal communities.

Interpersonal contact is important in this Aboriginal cultural context. ICT does have a role in keeping Aboriginal people, particularly those living in urban centres, informed and connected to their communities. This is a benefit that is quite readily achievable. For example, Aboriginal websites can exert a powerful effect as people have a chance to see, hear and read about the community life on a real time basis (which harkens back to the "information as a public resource" argument).

How to use ICT to engage Aboriginal people in the processes of government that affect them will have to be thought through carefully. This is one area that leaped out for pilot initiatives or demonstration projects. Linking of Aboriginal service delivery to citizen engagement was seen as one way to promote greater Aboriginal participation in governance and decision-making.

The use of ICT by national and regional Aboriginal political organizations and institutions has potential as a tool for engaging the grassroots in Aboriginal communities, particularly Aboriginal youth who are already comfortable communicating through ICT. Participants agreed that ICT can be the link between the people in the communities and the leaders so that grassroots views are better inputted and considered in decision-making. Atlantic participants also noted that Indigenous communities are using technology worldwide to connect – this is a strong and important support mechanism that can be built upon to advance political agendas both nationally and internationally.

4) Sustainable Capacity

The Atlantic Roundtable reiterated the priority of creating the infrastructure and capacity to sustain Aboriginal e-government at the community level. There was strong endorsement of approaching the infrastructure and connectivity issue from the perspective of a public utility. Cheap, easy to use, high speed access to the internet is today's equivalent of putting in place the telephone system. The public utility approach essentially means two things for Aboriginal people and communities: assured access at reasonable costs to high speed broadband service on par with other Canadians and governments taking on the responsibility to ensure this outcome. The federal government, working with provinces and the private sector, was seen to have key role in ensuring the connectivity of Aboriginal communities across Canada. Most participants felt the climate for this approach in Atlantic Canada was positive and this concept of a public utility approach could be tackled in a strategic manner through the coordination of efforts and pooling and building on existing resources.

Participants also felt that a sustainability agenda could benefit from a regional approach and there were already important assets in place on which to build and maintain momentum. First Net and BRAND (the broadband initiative) are examples of regional approaches to capacity building. The Atlantic Chiefs through the Atlantic Policy Congress have mandated the organization to pursue a region wide ICT strategy. It was noted however that Inuit communities and urban Aboriginal groups and organizations do not have the resources and are poorly positioned to benefit from these regional initiatives because of their on-reserve focus. Smaller and remote communities are in a similar situation. Even though participants saw major challenges they agreed that these were issues that needed to be addressed in any regional approach to Aboriginal e-government. Ensuring equitable access to resources and capacity has to be addressed as a national issue given the many constraints and limitations on accessing federal resources and funding off-reserve.

Participants also identified a number of prerequisites for effective and sustainable Aboriginal e-government. Some have already been mentioned, however in summary these factors include:

- Community wide and ready access to broadband.
- Community capacity building that systematically incorporates into ICT opportunities into community and strategic planning - having a road map for building capacity that would identify opportunities and key partnerships while highlighting areas of risk and significant obstacles.
- Long-term financing for e-government initiatives based on community plans and multiple sources of funding, including the consideration of user fees.
- Being able to demonstrate and promote practical applications of ICT, particularly in the service and cultural end of the spectrum.
- Sharing and demonstrating best practises to assist local champions in the marketing of Aboriginal e-government to a broader audience.
- Aboriginal leadership who will act as champions of e-government.

Building Partnerships & Collaborations

Participants were also asked to consider what practical steps could be taken to facilitate the development of e-government partnerships and where energies might best be focused in an Atlantic context.

More and more, collaboration and partnerships are widely regarded as key underpinnings for effective e-government. Partnerships represent a way of realizing opportunities, mobilizing scarce resource, mitigating risk, staying abreast of new systems and applications, ensuring skills are developed and maintained, and up to date technologies are harnessed. The Aboriginal Voice National Roundtable saw partnerships and collaboration as being crucial to the effective and rapid evolution of Aboriginal e-government. Discussions and models of partnership in an information and communications context most often focus on the relationship between government and

the private sector. While these and other relationships, such as with the post secondary sector, are key in an Aboriginal context, communities working together for common benefit - having strategies that cluster efforts, develop shared capacity and pool resources - are an important added dimension of the Aboriginal e-government picture. The National Roundtable demonstrated that Aboriginal groups are using a wide variety of cooperative models serving a diversity of purposes. They range from tripartite or multi-stakeholder collaborative discussion forums, to joint ventures, to new social and economic institutional arrangements.

There are a considerable number of best practices emerging from research on Aboriginal partnerships and collaborative initiatives. These include:

- Securing strong senior level involvement, including political commitment;
- Investing upfront in communications and dialogue to build cultural understanding and a joint vision and to set realistic objectives;
- Investing time, energy and funds into relationship building through collaborative forums;
- Building trust through information sharing, establishing common priorities and objectives and developing working level groups;
- Establishing clear mandates, roles, responsibilities and expectations;
- Investing in Aboriginal technical and organizational capacity building;
- Ensuring ongoing efforts are made to maintain community level support, particularly for multi-community initiatives;
- Focusing on practical initiatives with timely results;
- Developing flexible, innovative and long-term financial arrangements; and
- Institutionalizing effective governance arrangements when the goal is achieving sustained on-the ground results.

Fundamentally, building relationships and capacity at the Aboriginal level have proven to be the largest determinants of success. Building Aboriginal capacity involves investment; however, studies show that there can be a very good return on investment both in the sustainability of initiatives and the level of results.

Atlantic Roundtable participants urged that multi-stakeholder forums are important for fostering trust and confidence, often a much needed ingredient among stakeholders whose histories may include long and difficult aspects to their relationship. The very newness of ICT may help alleviate some of challenges and create a more open environment to capitalize on and build new partnership relationships. As well, many case studies are pointing to a new willingness to get beyond jurisdiction and authority quagmires and focus on practical initiatives that will result in on-the-ground social and economic benefits.

At the Atlantic Roundtable there were three panel presentations and a breakout session around the issues of collaboration and partnership, from which two models emerged. One model, as presented by Bernd Christmas, the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) for the

Membertou Corporate Division (MCD), is a capacity building model. The other, the Mawi Wolakomiksultine Project, is a multi-stakeholder partnership.

The *Mawi Wolakomiksultine Project* is a pilot project using tele-health technologies to deliver Mental Health & Addictions services. The partners include Tobique First Nation, the River Valley Health Authority, First Nation Communities in Region 3, Health Canada, and the New Brunswick Department of Health and Wellness. Some of the challenges faced by this project are common to many multi-stakeholder partnerships. When bringing together different parties, cultural or political inconsistencies can emerge, usually stemming from the different organizational cultures, standards, practices, and policies brought to the table by the various parties.

However, the success of this particular pilot has provided some excellent lessons learned and best practices. For example, starting with a small circle of partners is essential to build trust and momentum. Amongst this small group, it is easier to negotiate and reach consensus around the key deliverables and what the benefits should be for each partner. Partners should be brought in based on identified common needs and each of their roles and responsibilities should be made clear at the outset. These strategies help to overcome cultural differences between partners by making the expectations around the process and outcomes clear from the very beginning. Only based on this common understanding can the group begin to move forward and build on existing partnerships and available resources.

The second model, based on the Corporate Division (MCD), focuses more on capacity building at the community level. The primary successes of MCD have resulted from joint ventures and partnerships with large private sector companies. This highly successful partnership strategy adopts a systematic and staged approach that builds business and community capacities and carefully gears the scale of its business partnerships to that capacity. Partnerships are leveraged to support the further building local capacity, which serves as a platform for an expanded range and scale of partnerships. Membertou has reached the point where there are substantial synergies and many new opportunities arising from its many business partnerships.

Overall, there is widespread evidence that Aboriginal communities, governments at all levels, and private sector stakeholders are quite optimistic about the prospects of increased collaboration and partnerships and are finding innovative ways to make this happen. From the experience in Atlantic Canada we can reiterate that investing in and developing Aboriginal capacity needs to be fully factored into any partnership or collaboration strategy. Finally, successful collaboration is a long term commitment. It involves cultural understanding and learning. All stakeholders have to come to the table with this type of commitment and bring with them a philosophy that encourages creativity and tools that support innovation.

Moving Aboriginal Voice Forward

In this facilitated plenary session participants were asked to identify a short list of recommendations on Aboriginal e-government that they would like to see discussed further through Aboriginal Voice Roundtable and online dialogue processes. Participants identified three areas where they saw Aboriginal Voice playing an ongoing role.

- 1) Use Aboriginal Voice as an “information and network clearing house” that would map existing networks, resources and activities and share this information. This information would be useful to organizations interested in entering strategic partnerships. As well, having this information available in one place would provide those interested with an inventory of best practices.
- 2) Aboriginal Voice could also be used to initiate and coordinate future multi-stakeholder discussions to ensure on-going engagement of the different sectors. Getting people together from different sectors helps build trust among different parties and such events would provide important networking opportunities for partnerships, of which the benefits have already been discussed.
- 3) Aboriginal Voice could focus the role of government in making Aboriginal e-government a reality. To date government investments in Aboriginal technology have been “all over the map”. Ongoing consultation and Aboriginal engagement is critical to ensure the coordination of strategic investments that reflect community priorities. Participants suggested that investments not only be strategic, but incremental, and in conjunction with negotiations with the province around large connectivity investments and telecommunication companies in order to determine the most viable options.

An Atlantic Aboriginal E-Government Strategy

Finally, participants in the Aboriginal Voice Atlantic Roundtable were asked to address questions around regional approaches, regional models, and governance arrangements for Aboriginal e-government. They were also asked to consider what the priority areas for partnership and essential elements for success would include.

Roundtable participants agreed that a collaborative, multi-stakeholder effort was both desirable and possible for moving Aboriginal e-government forward in Atlantic Canada. Having a core group of champions and adopting a regional approach to facilitate cooperation and partnerships on-the-ground were seen as core elements of the strategy.

Participants identified a number of key regional objectives that could form the basis of an Aboriginal e-government agenda that were relevant across the Atlantic region. The overarching priority is to create sustainable systems and partnerships at the community level that are practically focused and viable for the long term. Participants from all sectors agreed to establish a regional ICT Steering Committee to carry out this agenda.