

Indigenous Governments Fiscal Systems conference

Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada

April 11-12, 2002

Report

By Anne-Béatrice Bullinger and Nicole Pedersen

Background

The conference on Indigenous Governments fiscal Systems took place in Vancouver, BC April 11-12, 2002. The Forum's main partners were the Assembly of First Nations (AFN) and the National Congress of American Indians (NCAI).

The conference was intended to facilitate dialogue and share knowledge of how indigenous governments are establishing and improving their fiscal relationships with other governments. A key focus of the conference was the issue of taxation and revenue-raising powers of indigenous governments in two different federal systems: Canada and the United States. Stakeholders from both countries as well as well as representatives from Brazil, Mexico, Australia and New Zealand participated in the event.

Issues

About 70 high level practitioners took an active part in the conference. The debates focused on ways to develop independent sources of revenue for First Nations and on possible solutions to transform the vicious circle of dependency into a virtuous circle by which indigenous governments could create the tools to better manage their economy.

The comparative focus of the conference created a positive dynamic by which participants were seeking to share experience and look toward the future rather than focus on contentious topics.

The dialog that took place between the Canadian government officials and the First Nations representatives was indeed very productive and disclosed no particular tensions. The federal government seemed very open to accommodate First Nations' concerns and help develop necessary institutions. Besides the debates between government and First Nations within each country, a dialog was established between the various countries represented. This conference was the first follow-up after the declaration that was signed between the AFN and the NCAI in 1998. Both partners reiterated their willingness to work together closely.

The debates went well beyond the conference room and expanded during coffee breaks and meals. This created some ties within the group and allowed for discussion of future projects.

Participants

The Canadian federal government was represented by Gordon Shanks, Assistant Deputy Minister, Economic Development and Special Initiatives, Indian and Northern Affairs Canada (INAC), Stuart Swanson also from INAC and Ken Medd from Finance Canada, as well as by representatives from the Canada Customs and Revenue Agency.

The key speaker for the Canadian First Nations was Manny Jules who has been working very hard on those issues for the past years and has managed to gather support from the federal government. Phil Fontaine, former AFN Chief also participated in the conference along with a number of key actors, among which young and promising First Nations representatives.

As for the USA, the federal government was represented by William Quinn, from The US Department of the Interior and Christie Jacobs from the Internal Revenue Service. There were two representatives of the NCAI, John Dosset (General Counsel) and Colleen Cawston (Recording Secretary). The US speakers focused their presentation on current issues and best practices.

One of the Forum's tasks was to secure international participation in this workshop. The Forum invited Joseph Elu, Chairman of Indigenous Business Australia, Sam Napia, CEO of the Hauraki Maori Trust Board, New Zealand, as well as three indigenous representatives from Mexico and two from Brazil. Even though the latter were invited as observers, they participated actively in the conference and made very touching statements. While the US and Canadian participants focused mostly on revenue-raising issues, the Brazilian and Mexicans pointed to the fact that raising revenue and managing government-like functions were not yet on their agenda and that their struggles were focused on maintaining a traditional way of life and obtaining a true recognition of their status. Their presence was nevertheless very important as it helped put the debates into perspective and show several ways of tackling the issues.

Among the international speakers, Sam Napia was probably the most impressive. His presentation was much appreciated and strong ties were established between him and several participants.

Some Outcomes

The participants were unanimous in their appreciation of the event. Similar conferences are sought in the near future. As a first step, the main stakeholders of each country represented will hold a conference call in May to discuss follow-up actions. The conference proceeding will be made available and should help to draft future projects. The US, Australian, Mexican and Brazilian representatives each proposed to hold an event in their country.

This conference was instrumental in enhancing the current dialog between the federal government and the First Nations and should help ensure the establishment of First Nations fiscal institutions.