

**Indigenous Leadership: Governance and Development Project**

## **Case Study**

# **Kici Anishinabek Kananakachiwewat Community Service Cooperative**

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## **Indigenous Leadership: Governance and Development Project**

One of the key actions in Saskatchewan's Growth Plan 2020-2030 is to grow Indigenous participation in the economy. The success of this action depends on Indigenous nations in Saskatchewan building and maintaining their economic development activities. The Indigenous Leadership: Governance and Development project provides made-in-Saskatchewan tools for Indigenous communities to build the governance foundation that will support long-term economic development. An important part of the project involves capturing the experience of Saskatchewan Indigenous communities through case studies and toolkits based on this experience.

The case study in this document was developed by a team of researchers and their affiliates at the Johnson Shoyama Graduate School of Public Policy at the University of Saskatchewan. The project is funded by the Government of Saskatchewan's Ministry of Trade and Export Development.

The case studies are designed to be used first and foremost by Indigenous communities across Saskatchewan. The premise of the work is that economic development stories need to be shared among those involved in economic development, both in the community where the economic development activities take place and in other communities looking to undertake economic development. It is important to focus on what has and has not worked. One of the long-term goals is to develop a set of resources that is Indigenous-led and available to Indigenous communities across the province and the country. The cases may also be used as governance training components and/or strategic planning exercises, as well as in teaching.

The case studies combine material from websites and other publicly available sources with material gathered through interviews with leaders and representatives involved in economic development activities. The interviews last between two and four hours and involve a small group of economic development leaders in the community. The questions asked focus solely on the corporate entities and activities that have been developed, and those interviewed are asked questions in their role as a corporate leader.

When approaching community leaders and representatives, they begin with an informal discussion. If the leaders and representatives indicate an interest in participating, they proceed with sending them a formal letter of introduction, which they can use to obtain official permission to proceed. They know communities receive many requests for information, and they do not always see the results of the work that is undertaken. Our goal is to ensure that the case study is shared with the community in a way that is beneficial. To this end, a draft of the case study is shared with the community, and the case study is not finalized until the community gives its agreement. Once a set of case studies have been developed, leaders from the communities involved will be given the opportunity to discuss the findings.

They would like to thank the leaders and representatives for their time and effort. Their knowledge and insights are critical to understanding economic development in Indigenous communities.

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## **Kici Anishinabek Kananakachiwewat Community Service Cooperative**

*Preserving Anishinabek culture*

### **Overview and Key Learnings**

This case study profiles the creation of the Kici Anishinabek Kananakachiwewat Community Service Cooperative (from this point referred to as “KAKC”), a co-operative formed by Elders of the Cote First Nation in southern Saskatchewan. It explores the connection between the culture of a First Nation and its foundational impact on the community’s economic development. KAKC was incorporated in 2021 as a direct response to the threat faced by the Anishinabek culture resulting from government policy, the legacy of residential schools, and declining knowledge of the Onakawawin language. The goal of KAKC’s founding members is to establish programs that will preserve the use of their language and support the cultural education of a new generation.

The development of a community service co-operative to preserve a First Nation’s culture offers important insights for Indigenous leaders, Elders, and policymakers. Historically, the work of the Elders would be informal and subject to interference by political leaders or threatened by a lack of resources. Using an appropriate corporate model to formalize their governance and financial management opened new doors for KAKC’s members to advance their goals. Using a co-op allowed access to new revenue streams and independence from governments and other organizations.

Reflecting on the establishment of a new not-for-profit co-operative and culturally appropriate programming offers important insights for other start-ups and Indigenous communities. The use of a co-op to undertake this type of work is an innovative approach that offers a model that can be adapted by other communities with similar goals. The case study concludes with four important lessons to guide similar initiatives:

1. Align corporate governance with traditional values
2. Separate business and politics
3. Identify key supporters
4. Build business and governance capacity

The case study offers insights into the harm done to First Nation communities by the Government of Canada and the enduring impact felt on a people’s culture and prosperity. To properly contextualize KAKC’s work, we must explore the residential school system, the history of the Cote First Nation since colonization, and the connections between culture and economic development. KAKC’s members, through their work seek to not only undo past harms but create the conditions for future prosperity.

## The Cote First Nation

Cote First Nation is a Saulteaux Nation and part of the Ojibwa language in eastern Saskatchewan. The Saulteaux people are a part of the Algonquian language family that spans from Newfoundland to the Rocky Mountains and south into the United States. The ancestors of the Cote Nation lived in eastern Saskatchewan and Manitoba (Thompson, 2006; Cote First Nation, 2024).

Chief MĪMĪY (Gabriel Coté; translates to Pigeon) signed Treaty 4 on September 15, 1874, but did not establish the reserve until 1877. The settled land was initially connected to the neighbouring Keeseekoose First Nation and the Key First Nation. Despite this arrangement, the three First Nations decided to separate and become three distinct nations (Cote First Nation, 2024).

As a separate nation, the Cote First Nation was 56.6 square miles with a population of 250 members. However, in 1904 with the construction of the railway and the establishment of the town of Kamsack, the band was forced to surrender 24.8 square miles of land at \$10 per acre. Today, the Cote First Nation is 31.7 square miles. There were 4,252 registered members, with 1,172 members living on-reserve and 3,080 members living off-reserve. Approximately 65 members of the reserve could speak their native language (Onakawawin) (Crown-Indigenous Relations and Northern Affairs Canada, 2021).

## The Residential School System

Residential schools were government-sponsored schools run by churches in Canada between 1831 and 1996. The purpose of the residential school system was to assimilate Indigenous children into Canadian society. It is estimated that 150,000 children attended over 130 schools during this period (Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 2015).

Throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Government of Canada systematically expanded control over Indigenous peoples in Canada. The first residential school, the Mohawk Indian Residential School, opened in 1831 in Brantford, Ontario. The Government of Canada introduced the Indian Act in 1876, giving it exclusive rights over Indians and Indian lands. In 1883, Prime Minister John A. Macdonald authorized the creation of residential schools in western Canadian and in 1885 the Indian Act was amended to prohibit traditional ceremonies. In 1920, Deputy Superintendent of Indian Affairs, Duncan Campbell, made it compulsory that all children from the ages of seven to fifteen attend residential schools (Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 2015; Niessen, 2017).

On the Cote First Nation reserve, the Presbyterian Church built the Crowstand Indian Residential School in 1899. This school operated until 1915, when it was replaced by Cote Federal Improved Day School in 1916. The Presbyterian Church operated this school until 1925, when it was taken over by the United Church (The Women's Missionary Society). The Government of Canada officially approved board students at Cote Federal Day School from 1928 to 1940 (Niessen, 2017).

After the Cote Federal Day School was closed in 1940, children were sent to the Fort Pelly Indian Residential School near Kamsack. Fort Pelly Indian Residential School was operated by a Roman Catholic church near Kamsack and located on the Keeseekoose First Nation. Established in 1895, the Fort Pelly school was given per capita grants from 1905 until its closure in 1913. St. Philip's was built in 1927 to replace the Fort Pelly school and was operated by the Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate from 1925 to 1969 (Niessen, 2017).

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC) concluded that residential schools were “a systematic, government-sponsored attempt to destroy Aboriginal cultures and languages and to assimilate Aboriginal peoples so that they no longer existed as distinct peoples.” The TRC characterized this intent as “cultural genocide” (Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 2015).

A founding member of KAKC, Wilfred (Smitty) Cote spoke about the impact of residential schools on the Cote First Nation and the need for the work KAKC intended to do: “This is not our fault that we lost our language or culture. It's the government and churches that took that away from us. It's how come we're all like this, that started a long, long time ago, 100 years ago, 200 years ago, they came here and guess what their plan was to take our language and culture away, put us down here, but we're just about right down to the bottom here. No, no, we got to, they got to help bring this back out here.”

### **Culture and Economic Development**

First Nation economic development is inextricably linked to the First Nation's culture. Countless studies across North America, many associated with the Harvard Project on Indigenous Governance and Development, find that culture and factors associated with it matters to a nation's economic development. In their study on youth involvement in BC's economic development, Perrin Thorau & Associates (2009) state, “Successful economies stand on the shoulders of legitimate, culturally grounded institutions of self-government.” Writing a decade earlier, Cornell and Kalt (1998) claim that “without sovereignty and nation-building, economic development is likely to remain a frustratingly elusive dream.”

What makes up a First Nation's culture? Why is it tied to economic development? There are many factors to consider in a culture — prominent among those are language, a shared heritage, ceremonies, traditional ways of knowing, and teachings. In other words, the factors that contribute to one's identity and a shared sense of community.

Throughout Canada's history, government policy, such as the residential school system, sought to erode the identity of First Nations peoples and to assimilate them into settler society. The resulting decline in language preservation, intergenerational trauma, and loss of ceremonies impacted the culture of First Nations people and hindered efforts at economic development.

Co-op member Jacqueline Whitehawk reflected on the declining language rates among Cote First Nation members: “So many of us, they say yeah, I'm Indian. Yeah, I'm from Cote. Yeah, I'm Anishinabek ... but we don't know our language, and that's part of shame and shame is a wicked thing. It cuts us off from learning.” One of the enduring impacts of residential schools is a loss of language and the cultural impacts that come with it.

KAKC seeks to reverse the trauma inflicted by residential schools on their community. Central to its work are efforts to enable young people to learn the Onakawawin language, ensuring its survival for future generations. Fitzgerald and Milligan (2004) worked with the Dakota Sioux on language preservation programs and found that “relearning a shared language ... is a process of relearning what it means to be an Indian ... and a community .... Language programs serve as one of several initiatives to promote traditional identity. It should not stand as the sole priority, but it provides a firm starting ground to increase community cohesion and solidarity.” Community cohesion and solidarity are not necessary prerequisites to economic development but provide a strong starting point to advance prosperity.

KAKC's members estimate that only 20 percent of the First Nation's members know how to speak their language. Many of those that do speak the Onakawawin language are Elders, making the language at risk of being lost. Co-op board member, Wanda Cote, expressed the importance of their work, "without the language and without the culture, there can be no ceremonies. You can't do the ceremonies in English, so that would be lost if we lost our language."

Co-op member Brian Severight echoed Wanda's sentiments, drawing a direct line between the culture and the Onakawawin language, "The language goes hand-in-hand with the culture. We are given that language by the Creator – it's not written down, it's handed down by the Creator – to us Indian people to carry on, to pass on to our children. A way of life, even a way of life."

In a 2013 report, the Government of Canada surveyed representatives of 25 nations from across Canada to understand the factors of economic success on reserve. The report identifies four key factors:

1. rules and systems that work
2. local decision-making
3. community capacity
4. useable land base.

Central to this case study is factor three: community capacity. The report states, "when community members have a strong source of pride in their culture, a base of education and skills, and good leadership, they are more likely to see themselves as potential agents of change and believe in change as a realistic possibility."

The work of KAKC is critical to developing community capacity for the Cote First Nation. The members of KAKC seek to build an awareness of cultural teachings and a sense of pride and respect for the community's traditions. In doing so, they are providing a foundation for community members, especially youth, to gain the skills and capacity needed to become agents of change.

The Government of Canada's 2013 report clarifies that the surveyed First Nations do not want economic development at any cost. Interview participants highlight the need for culturally led economic development that is in keeping with local traditional values. KAKC's work in helping to facilitate this shared sense of value is important to support the kind of economic activity community members pursue. Interview participants were also clear that a healthy local economy was desirable, but was secondary to an emotional, spiritual, and physically healthy community.

The work of KAKC extends beyond the preservation of language. While that aspect of their work is important and central to their cultural activities, it is a means to a larger goal: the health and well-being of their community and its members. In this next section, we will describe KAKC, its structure, core programs, and activities to date to understand how they operationalize a new entity to build community capacity and development.

### **A New Approach: Kici Anishinabek Kananakachiwewat Community Service Co-operative**

In the fall of 2021, a group of Elders from the Cote First Nation began meeting to discuss ideas and opportunities to offer programming that would promote their culture and healthy lifestyles. The group was comprised of professionals from diverse educational and professional backgrounds, including nursing, education, local government, and cultural work. All those involved shared a common concern

for their community and all had attended residential school. The Elders were acutely aware of the legacy of residential schools and intergenerational trauma. They had seen the impact of drugs in the community; over a period of several months, ten people had died.

There was a shared understanding that the decline of Onakawawin language speakers would continue, and with it traditional ceremonies, culture, and identity would be lost. The urgency of the task was expressed by founding member Madeline Whitehawk: “us Elders, we got together this summer and we said, ‘what are we going to do?’ ... as Elders, we want to do something now, not next month, not next year, we can’t afford that.” The group recognized that they would need funding to implement their ideas, and that to secure financial support they’d need to incorporate as a not-for-profit entity.

Incorporating would offer the group several advantages and would help them overcome the challenges they faced. A separate organization would allow them to open a bank account and raise funds independently. This was particularly important for the group who had conversations with churches that were willing to provide funding in the spirit of reconciliation. These potential funders wanted assurances that the funds would be managed appropriately by a not-for-profit entity.

Additionally, a separate legal entity would allow the group freedom to operate independently of the Tribal Council and their local First Nation government. The group had experienced previous efforts to host cultural events and language instruction that were hampered by the council.

Finally, the group was aware of charities and their ability to issue tax-deductible receipts but were unsure of the steps needed to register a charitable organization.

The group of Elders had been meeting at the Yorkton Tribal Council (YTC) offices. YTC staff were providing financial support and guidance to the team as they sought to formalize their work. YTC’s economic development coordinator recommended that the Elders contact Co-operatives First to determine if a membership-based co-operative model would match the group’s goals.

### **Building a Community Service Co-operative**

To identify if a co-operative would align with their goals, the Elders began working with Co-operatives First, a Saskatoon-based non-profit that supports the creation of co-ops. When starting a co-operative there are many factors a group needs to consider to ensure that the structure aligns with their goals and how they intend to operate. In particular, there are four important considerations:

- **Purpose:** Unlike conventional corporations, a co-operative’s purpose is to provide goods or services for the benefit of KAKC’s owners — its members. In other words, a co-operative is owned by the people who use it.
- **Decision-making:** Co-operatives, like other corporations, are led by a board of directors that oversee the day-to-day governance and management of the company. Additionally, co-op members make decisions using a one-member, one-vote rule, ensuring equality among its owners.
- **Profit-sharing:** Co-operatives that share their profits with members usually do so using patronage dividends, issuing the member’s share of profits in proportion to how much they used the business. However, the majority of Canada’s co-operatives operate on a not-for-profit basis and do not issue dividends to members.

- **Open Membership:** Co-operatives do not have defined memberships the way non-profit corporations do. They must maintain an open membership – i.e., membership is available to those who can use the co-operative's services.

The vision the Elders had for their organization did not align with a conventional consumer or producer owned co-operative. Instead, the team at Co-operatives First recommended creating a community service co-operative.

A community service co-operative is a special-purpose co-operative regulated under the Saskatchewan Co-operatives Act, 1996. It is distinct from other types of co-ops as it aligns more closely with non-profit corporations. Community service co-operatives generally provide services for the community, rather than just the members. Examples in Saskatchewan include seniors housing, recreation centres, curling rinks, and childcare co-ops. Like non-profit corporations, community service co-operatives are prohibited from allocating any profit to their members. They still use a one-member, one-vote system and rely on a board for day-to-day leadership.

The Elders were drawn to the community service co-operative model, recognizing that it would satisfy their operational and financial requirements when working with funders. The model would also allow them to have an equal say in the governance of the organization.

In December 2021, working with Co-operatives First, the Elders incorporated as the Kici Anishinabek Kananakachiwewat Community Service Cooperative. The founders took care to ensure that KAKC aligned with the Canada Revenue Agency's (2012) charitable status requirements to ensure the following:

- KAKC exists for public benefit and its purpose is charitable in nature, focusing on recreation, education, and cultural activities.
- KAKC did not issue share capital, ensuring there is no private interest in the organization's ownership. Instead, the members can pay a small fee when they join KAKC.
- KAKC is prohibited from distributing any surplus revenue (profits) to the members. Instead, any surplus must be used to further KAKC's purpose, be set aside in a reserve fund, or be donated to another qualified organization.
- In the event KAKC dissolves, any remaining cash, once all liabilities have been paid, must be donated to a not-for-profit organization with similar objectives.
- KAKC's board of directors must serve on a voluntary basis and cannot receive compensation for their duty as directors.

Alignment with CRA's requirements for charities gives KAKC the option to apply for charitable status. This status would allow KAKC to solicit donations from individuals by offering tax-deductible receipts. In the short to medium term, seeking financial support from corporations, governments, and religious organizations was sufficient, and, since corporations cannot use tax-deductible receipts, these donations do not require charitable status as an incentive to the donors.

When creating KAKC's articles of incorporation and bylaws, the founding members wanted to ensure their Onakawawin language was incorporated into their governing documents. This includes KAKC's name: Kici Anishinabek Kananakachiwewat, which translates to "Elder Knowledge Keepers". KAKC's officers were also given names in the traditional language:



- President: Okima
- Vice-President: Natimage
- Secretary: Ka-ozipihigek
- Treasurer: Soniya-okima

### **Funding the Co-operative**

One goal of incorporating was to support KAKC's fundraising. This activity started with the churches that have maintained a presence in Cote First Nation through managing the residential schools. The founding members also recognized they could apply for grants to fund KAKC's programs and seek support from their First Nation governments.

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*We've met with the churches to get them involved and helping with the funding because they're the ones that are responsible for, you know, for what has happened to us and the loss of our language.*

*Madeline Whitehawk*

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To support KAKC's start-up progress, the Yorkton Tribal Council leased office space for KAKC in a commercial building in Kamsack for six months. YTC also donated used office supplies such as desks, chairs, a whiteboard, and office kitchen equipment. This office gave the Elders space to meet, plan, connect with partners, and map out a fundraising strategy that would support the programs they hoped to deliver that summer.

For the 2022 financial year, KAKC raised funds from the following sources:

Funder	Contribution (\$)
Archiepiscopal Corporation of Regina	15,246
Cote First Nation	20,000
Kia Communities in Motion	14,750
Saskatchewan Conference United Church of Canada	5,000
Yorkton Tribal Council Child & Family Services	12,310
<b>Total Contributions</b>	<b>67,306</b>

With funding secured, KAKC's members could develop programming that would engage their community and further their goals.

### **The Co-operative's Programs**

In the summer of 2022, KAKC launched its first program, a culture camp for members of the Cote First Nation. The camp attracted large crowds from the community and offered traditional and land-based activities. This included skinning animals and preparing hides, smoking meats, erecting a teepee, and cultural ceremonies. The camp was a success and provides a model that KAKC can deliver each summer. At the time of writing, KAKC is working on planning their third camp for the summer of 2024.

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*The other day, we had one. She was high on drugs, and she was driving and she got into a head-on collision. These are the kinds of things that we got to look at as a community. Why are our facilities not working? We have residential treatment center, we have a detox center, but many of our people are not utilizing them. And we got to find out why ... our people live in poverty, our children live in poverty. There's a lot of abandonment issues, a lot of child welfare issues. So, we want to work on this. And we started this camp. To get together to pull the community together the Elders and the youth to get them together to try and teach him some basic survival skills, teach them a little bit about the language, and some of the traditions and practice we have.*

*Wanda Cote*

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With the expertise of its members, KAKC provides language instruction with the goal of helping local educators learn their language in a train-the-trainer model. This model would amplify the impact of KAKC and reach more children.

As a Co-op of Elders, one of the core programs is to provide space. KAKC's office in Kamsack features ample seating and supplies for coffee and snacks, allowing members to gather and socialize.

### **Key Learnings**

KAKC was the first business, and certainly, co-op, started by the founding members. KAKC provided the members with an opportunity to formalize many of their processes, protect key interests, and access new avenues for funding. The process of developing KAKC also provided key insights for groups considering a similar approach and learnings about Indigenous-led businesses generally:

1. **Align Corporate Governance with Traditional Values**

Although a co-operative business offers many egalitarian benefits not common in the corporate world, as a colonial corporate model influenced by British parliamentary governance practices, it is still out of step with the traditional values held by First Nation Elders. Where possible, the Elders used their language and preferred methods for decision-making in KAKC's founding documents, such as KAKC's name, officers, and board resolution processes.

2. **Separate Business and Politics**

While forming KAKC, members expressed concern that local political leadership would attempt to take over KAKC. This had happened in the past when informal efforts were made to introduce cultural programming or raise funds to support similar initiatives. Because KAKC would be a vehicle to raise funds, the members wanted to ensure there was a clear separation between politics and the work they would pursue.

To guarantee this separation, KAKC's board developed an application process and set of membership qualifications to ensure that those seeking membership in KAKC did so because of their alignment with KAKC's values. Central to a co-op's identity is autonomy from other corporations and governments that may undermine their democratic member control. KAKC's advisors also encouraged the members to develop a code of conduct and a membership agreement to ensure remedial steps could be taken if a member sought to undermine KAKC's independence.

### 3. Identify Key Supporters

Starting any business, especially a co-operative, requires some external support. The members relied on key supporters to help them organize, build, and fund their new venture. Notably, Yorkton Tribal Council and their economic development staff were instrumental in supporting KAKC's planning phase, funding KAKC, and providing the basic requirements for their office. Co-operatives First was also instrumental in supporting the incorporation of KAKC and providing training and guidance to KAKC's board members.

### 4. Build Business and Governance Capacity

Establishing and managing a corporate entity led to some discomfort among the founding members. None of KAKC's members were familiar with bookkeeping, accounting practice, or annual reporting and compliance. There was worry that a misstep would lead to KAKC facing penalties or forcing its closure.

To mitigate any concerns and ensure KAKC remained compliant, the members sought support from a bookkeeper in Kamsack and advice from Co-operatives First. This included a board governance workshop that equipped the members with an understanding of their duties, and support organizing the annual general meeting and filing KAKC's annual return.

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