

Supporting Indigenous and Northern Entrepreneurship and SMEs



LOCATIONS

Across Canada



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CONTRIBUTORS

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KEY INSIGHTS

- 1** Indigenous and Northern-led organizations are best placed to leverage existing networks, integrate traditional knowledge and appropriate wrap-around services into supports for Indigenous and Northern entrepreneurs and SMEs.
- 2** Building trust and strong relationships with Indigenous and Northern organizations requires longer and more flexible funding timelines.
- 3** Funders should consider process adaptation to allow for Indigenous ways of knowing and working, including considering implications for proposal development and evaluation of impact.

The Issue

Indigenous and Northern entrepreneurs and small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) are essential to Canada's economy. There are over 50,000 Indigenous owned businesses across the country that contribute approximately \$31 billion dollars annually. Indigenous and Northern entrepreneurship and businesses play a crucial role in bolstering local economies by supporting economic diversification, job creation and community development.

Indigenous and Northern-led businesses and entrepreneurs have experienced significant growth in recent years, expanding at five times the rate of non-Indigenous ones. Entrepreneurship is increasingly seen as a vital pathway for individuals in the North, not only as a means of livelihood but also as a way to strengthen their communities and exercise their sovereignty. It plays a key role in building economic resilience, fostering self-reliance, and promoting culturally relevant business models that align with local values. By creating jobs and reinvesting in their communities, Indigenous and Northern entrepreneurs contribute to long-term sustainability and economic autonomy.

However, Indigenous and Northern SMEs and entrepreneurs operate within a landscape shaped by systemic barriers that hinder economic growth and opportunity. Many Northern communities face a shortage of critical infrastructure, such as reliable internet and technical resources, limiting access to key business tools and markets more readily available in urbanized regions. The enduring socio-economic impacts of colonialism continue to create disparities, while geographic isolation restricts access to financial institutions, business networks, and government support systems. Additionally, the limited diversification of Northern economies makes them more vulnerable to economic shifts, and Indigenous workers remain overrepresented in precarious jobs that are highly susceptible to downturns, exacerbating economic instability.

Beyond systemic barriers, Indigenous and Northern entrepreneurs also face distinct challenges in accessing the education, training, and resources needed to build successful businesses. Limited availability of business education and training programs, combined with inadequate outreach, means many entrepreneurs are unaware of, or unable to access crucial support. Raising capital and building professional networks is particularly difficult, restricting growth opportunities. Logistical constraints in remote communities further complicate participation in training and mentorship programs, and financial or administrative burdens often prevent entrepreneurs from enrolling in skills development initiatives. Many individuals must leave their communities to pursue education and business opportunities, creating isolation and depriving communities of local talent that could otherwise contribute to economic development.

Addressing these challenges requires a fundamental shift in how Indigenous and Northern SMEs and entrepreneurs are supported. There is a growing recognition of the need for culturally relevant business programming and training that integrates and honors Indigenous knowledge, values, and ways of learning and recognizes the realities of the North. Entrepreneurs are increasingly seeking tailored support that reflects their lived experiences and the unique conditions in which they operate. By reexamining current approaches and investing in programs that are community-driven and culturally relevant, Canada can foster more effective and sustainable pathways for Indigenous and Northern business success.

What We Investigated

The Future Skills Centre developed a Northern and Indigenous strategy to drive its engagement with key partners and invest in skills development for Northern and Indigenous entrepreneurs and SMEs.

Between 2020 and 2022, the Future Skills Centre issued pan-Canadian funding opportunities, from which a portfolio of Northern-serving and Indigenous-serving projects was generated (in addition to other portfolios). The projects ranged in their thematic and sectoral focus. Many of these initial partners were not Northern-based or Indigenous-led, with some operating in the North in addition to non-Northern communities across Canada. While the project selection did not explicitly name Northern objectives or priorities, the Future Skills Centre did consult with provincial and territorial governments regarding policy and program priorities, and did seek to ensure geographic, organizational, and target population diversity. While this was a starting point to support Northern skills development, a more targeted and intentional approach could better support Northern and Indigenous partners and impact communities.

In addition to these projects, the Future Skills Centre partnered with the [Conference Board of Canada](#) on a labour market analysis and economic forecast in Northern Ontario, the Yukon and Nunavut, outlining in-demand skills and key challenges to workforce and skills development.

The Diversity Institute leveraged existing relationships, working closely with the Canadian Council on Indigenous Business to explore the [impact of automation on the Indigenous economy, skills for inclusive workplaces and the advancement of Indigenous people](#), and a mapping of the [contours of the Indigenous skills and employment ecosystem in Canada](#). The Diversity Institute also partnered with the Indigenous Tourism Association of Canada to explore [entrepreneurship and social innovation in Indigenous tourism development in Northern Canada](#).

In 2022, the Future Skills Centre formed an advisory committee composed of leaders with both professional and lived expertise in Northern and remote development, Indigenous communities, and skills development. The committee provided guidance for the Future Skills Centre in a more strategic and targeted approach for Northern engagement and investment. With this guidance, the Future Skills Centre invested in projects that emphasised systems-focused skills development initiatives. These investments prioritized projects that centered Indigenous and Northern voices in development and implementation, engaged community leaders, and integrated Indigenous knowledge and ways of learning into the project design.

Regional intermediaries

As a Southern-based institution, the Future Skills Centre focused on supporting Northern and Indigenous organizations in engaging SMEs and entrepreneurs by leveraging both intermediary and direct partnerships. The Future Skills Centre built intermediary partnerships with key organizations that have existing networks, capacity, knowledge and credibility within Northern and Indigenous communities. These intermediary partners supported skills development initiatives, ensuring context-appropriate, place-based funding while building trust as a Southern-based organization. One example of a key intermediary was [Yukonstruct](#) that worked with different community leaders to put on ten different programs providing tailored supports, connections to resources, systems-related pilots, and other activities that supported entrepreneurs and investors in the Yukon.

Direct Engagements

The Future Skills Centre also prioritized direct relationships and community- and region-specific opportunities that aligned with the overall strategy, but which fell outside the scope of the intermediary partnerships. This ensured engagement with diverse organizations, particularly Northern-based and Indigenous-led ones, that may not have had the capacity or interest to act as intermediaries themselves. Through partnering with organizations such as [EntrepreNorth](#), the Future Skills Centre supported an Indigenous-centered business that provided app-based resources and was responsive to the needs of Northern and Indigenous entrepreneurs. This organization brought a unique perspective to better support Northern and Indigenous entrepreneurs compared to non-Indigenous approaches across the ecosystem.

What We're Learning

The need for Northern- and Indigenous-led solutions

As a Southern-based institution, the Future Skills Centre recognized early on that having Northern- and Indigenous-led solutions is the best way to address the challenges Northern and Indigenous entrepreneurs and SMEs face. Projects consistently demonstrated the value of working with local experts—whether community leaders, institutions, or intermediary partners—who understood the unique economic and cultural landscape, and were skilled at the relationships that required a more intentional pace of development. For example, the Future Skills Centre partnered with Yukon University to develop a certificate program to help Indigenous entrepreneurs to monetize traditional land-based activities. This program was built around the unique needs of Indigenous entrepreneurs in the Yukon, engaging key community leaders in both its development and the delivery of the certificate. Organizations with projects serving Indigenous peoples or communities in the North, but that were not Indigenous-led or based in the North, tended to struggle with engagement, and sometimes required significant redesign to reflect community priorities once those relationships were established.

Building trust and relationships

The learnings from the projects showcase that sufficient time is critical to build meaningful relationships. This is particularly important for organizations operating outside of these communities, as meaningful engagement cannot be rushed. As a Southern-based institution, the Future Skills Centre recognized the need to collaborate with partners who could guide us in working respectfully and effectively within diverse Northern and Indigenous contexts. Partnerships with Indigenous institutions such as the [Inuvialuit Regional Corporation](#) and Qikiqtaaluk Corporation have been invaluable, not only in advancing shared initiatives but also as opportunities for learning and relationship-building. These collaborations reinforce the importance of trust, mutual respect, and community-led approaches in creating impactful and sustainable programs.

Providing holistic support to entrepreneurs and SMEs

The projects were most successful when they considered the holistic needs of Northern and Indigenous entrepreneurs and SMEs. This included having wrap around supports embedded into programs such as covering transportation costs or providing technology and digital resources to participants. A strong example of this approach is the Northern Entrepreneurs Accessing Training project from [Contact North](#), which offered financial assistance, including tuition and training allowances, to offset costs for entrepreneurs. If training took place during work hours, entrepreneurs received an allowance to support their employees; if training occurred outside work hours, employees were compensated for their personal time.

Funder-lessons to better support Northern and Indigenous partners

Effectively supporting Northern and Indigenous partners requires a commitment to showing up in meaningful ways and adapting approaches to better meet their needs. The Future Skills Centre has focused on key strategies to enhance this support, including working with Indigenous evaluators. Many Indigenous partners found this engagement to be of tremendous value, as the evaluation emphasised reflective engagement over documentation of impact. While the dialogue with the evaluator offered value to the partner, it was difficult to identify relevant lessons learned for other external audiences, as the learning was geared towards the implementing partner with minimal documentation for external parties.

Building on this learning, the Future Skills Centre also piloted more flexible reporting methods with some Indigenous partners, such as “learning circles” and “closing conversations.” The Future Skills Centre worked with an Indigenous facilitator to host reflective conversations with the partners to surface learning and insights of relevance to the wider skills ecosystem. These flexible practices were valued and appreciated by the partners. The Future Skills Centre has brought in [new evaluation and learning partners](#) and continues to balance cultural relevance and meaning in evaluation with demands for impact-focused evaluation.

The Future Skills Centre has also intentionally supported Northern- and Indigenous-led organizations in navigating the funding application process, providing direct assistance to key partners who may have limited capacity in preparing proposals. These initiatives reinforce the Future Skills Centre’s commitment to working in collaboration with Indigenous and Northern partners to create more effective, community-driven solutions to longstanding challenges.

Why It Matters

Strengthening Indigenous and Northern communities requires a shift from short-term solutions to long-term, community-driven approaches that build economic resilience. Sustainable support for Indigenous and Northern entrepreneurs and businesses not only fosters local prosperity but also contributes to reconciliation by aligning with the [Calls to Action for Truth and Reconciliation](#) focused on advancing economic self-determination.

A key component of this effort is the integration of Indigenous knowledge and culturally relevant approaches into education and skills development programs across Canada. Culturally relevant programming affirms Indigenous ways of being, knowing, and doing while placing control and ownership of economic and skills development firmly in the hands of Indigenous people and Northern communities. By prioritizing these approaches, Canada can move beyond providing short-term solutions and create lasting opportunities that empower economic resilience in Northern and Indigenous communities.

A growing national priority is to support Canada's North and strengthen Arctic sovereignty, including recognizing the sovereignty of Inuit and Indigenous groups. The Arctic is becoming increasingly significant due to climate change and the search for new resources. The region's economic potential is attracting interest not only from Canada and other Arctic states but also from global actors. An important element of sovereignty includes supporting Indigenous and Northern leadership in northern governance and economic development. This includes supporting Northern communities to develop skills and training programs, in partnership with growing industries. This will foster opportunities for individuals to stay in the North, strengthening overall community well-being.

As a Southern-based institution, it is essential to cultivate meaningful and equitable partnerships with Northern and Indigenous communities to effectively deliver skills development programs and support their long-term success. This requires a commitment to shifting perspectives, actively engaging local experts, and embracing flexibility to adapt to the unique needs and realities of these communities. By doing so, institutions can build the trust necessary for sustainable collaboration, foster ownership of programming and ultimately enhance the impact and relevance of the skills development support and training provided.

What's Next

The Future Skills Centre is building on its previous work to deepen investments and continue to work with select regional and strategic partners, for sustained engagement and system-wide impact in the North and with Indigenous communities. We are continuing to prioritize relationships with and projects led by Indigenous-led and Northern-based organizations and anchor institutions.

We have expanded our thematic focus beyond SMEs and entrepreneurship to a demand-driven approach, aligning with the self-defined needs of Northern and Indigenous communities. This focus supports Indigenous-led innovations in emerging industries, fostering circular economies that retain wealth in the North and reduce reliance on southern labour and industries.

Solutions for SME growth and entrepreneurship remain important as are solutions for key evolving sectors, which requires made-for-the-North skills development innovations, such as clean energy, environmental monitoring & sustainability, tourism, fisheries, construction/ infrastructure development and maintenance, and more. In addition to project investments, the Future Skills Centre is strengthening relationships with other funders of skills and training in Indigenous communities across Canada, including the Indigenous Affairs Directorate at Employment and Social Development Canada. Through this relationship, the Future Skills Centre is facilitating connections between other philanthropic organizations and the large network of skills & training providers supported through the Indigenous Skills and Employment Training Program.



Projects in this Report

[Lighting up the North, Yukonstruct](#)

[Taking IT Digital – EntrepreNorth](#)

Supporting Place-Based SMEs – Yukon University (insights report forthcoming)

[Northern Entrepreneurs Accessing Training \(NEAT\) – Contact North](#)

[Inuvialuit Skills Matrix – Inuvialuit Regional Corporation](#)

Documenting Learnings and Best Practices for Inshore Fishery Entrepreneurship in the Qikiqtani region of Nunavut – Qikiqtaaluk Corporation (insights report forthcoming)

[Entrepreneurship and Social Innovation in Indigenous Tourism – Indigenous Tourism Association of Canada & The Diversity Institute](#)

[Sustainable Northern Livelihoods – Conference Board of Canada](#)

[Learning from One Another: Economic and Labour Forecast for Northern Ontario, Yukon, and Nunavut – Conference Board of Canada](#)

Have questions about our work? Do you need access to a report in English or French? Please contact communications@fsc-ccf.ca.

How to Cite This Report

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