

## Poverty and human development

### The North “like Darfur”

Most of the time, Nick Finney’s job is to respond to rapid-onset humanitarian disasters — floods, earthquakes and health emergencies. But in First Nations communities in northern Canada last winter he witnessed “the slowest evolved disaster that I’ve ever worked in.”

Finney, based in Britain, is Save the Children’s acting head of emergency capacity. He was invited by the remote communities to visit and conduct international aid-style assessments. “At first, it seemed like my work in Kenya after the flood — creating a multidisciplinary team of locals and others, taking a plane to remote communities,” he said in a telephone interview from London. “But this disaster goes back to the last century. The level of deprivation is truly shocking. We visited a damp, 1-bedroom house with a family of 25 living in it.”

The aid worker compared what he saw in Canada with regions that had



Dr. Tom Kovesi

Canada’s troubled and impoverished First Nations communities are drawing increased international attention. Among remedies that have been proposed is pairing communities with international aid agencies.

endured years of conflict. “In a natural disaster, hope is a vital thing. People lose family and possessions, but soci-

ety is united with those who can help. What I felt in northern Canada was like Darfur. The reasons are different, but

### The harsh numbers are unchanged

Tragedies among Canada’s Aboriginal population are often treated as isolated events and there is an illusion that “progressive thinking and improved attitudes have brought fair treatment to Canada’s native peoples.” That statement is from journalist Geoffrey York’s book, *The Dispossessed: Life and death in native Canada*, which was published 18 years ago. Current statistics continue to challenge that illusion:

The average income of the Aboriginal population was less than half that of the non-Aboriginal Canadian population in 2000 (\$14 157 compared to \$30 062), according to Statistics Canada.

The Inuit had slightly higher than Aboriginal-average incomes (\$19 878) in 2000, but have larger families (39% of Inuit are under age 15, compared to 19% of all Canadians) and face significantly higher costs of living. For example, the same staple foods cost more than 3 times as much in Clyde River, Nunavut, than in Ottawa (\$31.22 compared to \$9.47), according to Inuit Tapirisat Kanatami figures.

Fully 92 of the bottom 100 Canadian communities,

measured in terms of community well-being, were First Nations communities, according to calculations by Indian and Northern Affairs Canada.

Aboriginals living in urban areas of Canada are more than twice as likely to be living in poverty than other Canadians, according to the Canadian Council on Social Development.

About 3.3% of Canada’s population is Aboriginal, more than in Australia (2.2%) and the United States (1.5%), according to the 2001 Census.

In Canada, the term “Aboriginal” is used to encompass First Nations, Métis and Inuit, and the 2001 Census put their total population at about 1 million. Métis typically describes those of mixed (Indian and non-Indian) ancestry who self-identify as Métis, and Inuit are the Aboriginal people of Arctic Canada.

The term First Nations, however, while formally referring to Status and Non-Status Indians, is also sometimes used more broadly to include Métis. According to the 2001 Census, Inuit (then numbering about 45 000) make up about 5% of the Aboriginal population, Métis account for about 30% and North American Indian most of the balance.

there is a hopelessness, a despair, a sense of despondency.” Finney stressed that he also saw “powerful leadership” in the communities he visited, but said while “they are fighting hard, they need some help.”

Finney is far from the first to compare the living conditions of Canada’s Aboriginal peoples with those in the Third World. The United Nations’ Human Development Index, a standard measure that ranks the well-being of

member states, placed Canada number 6 among 192 nations in 2006.

But when the same formula is applied to data about the living conditions of Canada’s First Nations, a very different story emerges: in 2001 that ranking was number 76.

“Aboriginal people endure ill health, run-down and overcrowded housing, polluted water, inadequate schools, poverty and family breakdown at rates found more often in developing countries than in Canada. These conditions are inherently unjust.” That passage was from the extensive 1996 Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, which was co-chaired by Georges Erasmus, the former president of the Dene Nation and former National Chief of the Assembly of First Nations, which represents on- and off-reserve Aboriginals (but not Inuit) in Canada.

A recent Assembly of First Nations “report card” on the government’s response to the Royal Commission recommendations is damning: “The reality for First Nations communities today is *ongoing poverty* and an increasing gap in living conditions with other Canadians, which were reported during

the RCAP [Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples] hearings.”

Just last month, Canada voted against a United Nations declaration on Aboriginal rights, while the 2005 Kelowna Accord, an ambitious plan to close the gap between mainstream Canada and Aboriginals, was rejected by the federal Conservative government.

The \$5.4-billion accord had been endorsed by the federal, provincial and territorial governments in Canada under the previous Liberal government.

“I am very, very disappointed that Prime Minister Harper could not support Kelowna.... We call on all good people to continue to press this issue,” Assembly of First Nations National Chief Phil Fontaine told a nursing conference last August.

Canada has repeatedly come under fire from the United Nations committee on economic, social and cultural rights for the living conditions of Aboriginals.

In 1998, it called for an urgent national strategy on the issue and, in 2006, it expressed “shock and dismay” at the lack of progress in this area. — Ann Silversides, Toronto

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Some 27 000 Aboriginal children in Canada are now living in foster homes.

## Extending an invitation, and a hand

Consider yourself invited to Webequie, a First Nations community 540 kilometres north of Thunder Bay, Ont., with a population of about 700. Chief Scott Jacob would be pleased to show off his home to anyone who can find their way there because “we really want people in the south to better understand what is happening. You have to see for yourself. I think people just don’t believe what is written in the papers.”

Since 1997, 27 young people have committed suicide in Webequie. Jacobs’ efforts to raise money to establish a healing centre to deal with the resulting trauma have so far been unsuccessful.

Many houses are in very bad shape and the recent assessment report recommended that 100 new houses be built. The current electrical supply, however, can’t accommodate such construction, though Jacobs hopes to have a new electrical plant in a year. Meanwhile Webequie, located on an island on Winisk Lake, is accessible only by air for most of the year, which means supplies must be flown in and costs are high: gas is \$2.40 a litre.

The assessment report on Webequie was conducted under the auspices of the North-South Partnership for Chil-

dren. The partnership was founded last year to link members of remote communities with local and international foundations, organizations and individuals, to build cultural understanding and mobilize resources.

Co-founder Judy Finlay, former child advocate for Ontario, was frustrated by the intransigence of government and the lack of movement in communities she had visited for 2 decades.

“Up north, there is no United Way, no Family Service Association to help people — there is nothing but government.” To date the partnership has sent \$1.5-million worth of resources like food, clothing and recreational equipment to communities, said Finlay, now a professor at Ryerson University in Toronto.

Webequie has received tangible benefits: a Guelph, Ont., group recently raised \$2800 for musical instruments, and 8 canoes were donated to the island settlement to be used in a fall program that sees youth taken to the bush to learn traditional ways. Jacobs says he was particularly touched by a partnership donation last winter.

“There had been a lot of unemployment, and just before Christmas they sent up wrapped gifts for the children. Young mothers came by and you could really see them smiling.”