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**RPLC travel and mobility grant output- Blog post**

**Impact benefit agreements and the RPLC travel and mobility grant**

As natural resource projects continue to be developed in Canada, so too do the conflicts associated with these projects. These conflicts often stem from competing objectives and disagreement between the various parties associated with resource development including impacted communities (Indigenous and non-Indigenous), senior levels of government, and project developers. Managing these conflicts and ensuring that resource development projects are managed to mitigate adverse impacts and maximize community benefits are important priorities affecting the national economy and economic sustainability of Indigenous and non-Indigenous populations in rural regions.

Impact benefit agreements (IBAs), legally binding agreements negotiated between communities and project developers or government, have emerged as a tool that have the potential to achieve social consensus in resource development by mitigating adverse impacts and ensuring communities benefit from natural resource development. While IBAs have received some academic attention, they remain relatively new phenomena that require additional research to address research gaps. These gaps include understanding the role and effect of IBAs in the resource development governance system, identifying best practice negotiation tools and evaluation methodologies for designing effective IBAs, and exploring options for integrating IBAs into a government policy framework.

As a third year PhD candidate in the School of Resource and Environmental Management (REM) at Simon Fraser University, my research aims to address these critical research needs by advancing our understanding of the role of IBAs in resolving conflicts and achieving sustainable resource development, exploring and developing methods for improving IBA outcomes for all involved parties, expanding our knowledge concerning the core characteristics of effective IBAs, and translating this information effectively into supportive policy development.

In spring 2019, I was fortunate enough to receive a research and mobility grant from the Rural Policy Learning Commons. With the grant, my plan was to embark on two trips. The first trip was to St. John’s, Newfoundland in fall 2019 to attend and present at the Canadian Rural Revitalization Conference (CRRF) and the second trip was to Ottawa, Ontario in spring 2020 to attend a policy summit- a gathering of federal policymakers, researchers, and other stakeholders. Unfortunately, only one of these events actually took place.

Thanks to the research and exchange grant, I attended the 2019 Canadian Rural Revitalization Conference, which coincided with the North Atlantic Forum. The theme of the conference was sustainable communities, and I figured it would be an excellent opportunity to present some research related to community economic development. My presentation focused on a study that I had conducted with a few other researchers from REM in which we explored how communities can design IBAs in order to maximize economic benefits. In the study, we present alternative IBA revenue-generating tools, also referred to as fiscal instruments, and discuss their respective advantages and disadvantages. Additionally, we discuss non-revenue benefits, such as employment and infrastructure, and how they should be considered when designing an IBA. Presenting this research at the CRRF conference was important seeing as there were various community-focused researchers and community leaders in attendance. Ideally, these community researchers and leaders could build off of our research and put some of our recommendations into practice to ensure their communities are able to benefit from any resource projects that may impact them.

The policy summit that was expected to take place in spring 2020 was unfortunately cancelled due to the pandemic. This summit would have been a tremendous opportunity to participate in policy discussions with fellow researchers and federal policymakers. At the summit, I was hoping to mobilize some of my knowledge of IBA fiscal instruments and discuss how IBAs could be integrated into a government policy framework. Additionally, it would have been an excellent opportunity to witness constructive collaboration between researchers and policymakers, which is something that, to my understanding, does not occur as much as academics would like.

While I was not able to utilize the remainder of my research and mobility grant, I thank the RPLC for providing me with the opportunity to meet with fellow researchers from around the world and present my research on IBAs. Rural issues are complex and wide-ranging but meeting the talented and driven researchers that devote their brains to tackling these issues leaves me highly optimistic about the future of rural. My experiences over the course of my grant period have taught me that rural researchers must be dynamic and highly engaged in order to effectively mobilize research. Writing articles or policy briefs does nothing to address rural issues if no policymaker reads them. I have learned that it is up to a rural researcher to build working relationships with policy actors if they want to ensure that they are the one that gets the call when a policy window opens. I highly recommend that more events such as the policy summit take place to help build those working relationships between rural researchers and policymakers.