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**RPLC travel and mobility grant output- Research topic and thesis summary**

**Project title:** Resolving conflicts in resource development: The role of impact benefit agreements

**Introduction:** Natural resource extraction continues to make a significant contribution to the Canadian economy. But while resource extraction projects are capable of generating economic benefits for communities, projects can also cause significant adverse cultural, social, economic, and environmental impacts. Consequently, resource development is increasingly characterized by conflicts between impacted communities, senior levels of government, and project developers over adverse impacts and the distribution of benefits. A key research priority is understanding the nature of this conflict and mechanisms for resolving it.

An innovative mechanism that has recently emerged to resolve conflicts is the impact benefit agreement (IBA). IBAs are designed 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 Canada’s impact assessment (IA) process. The purpose of this research is 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.

**Objectives:** This research project will address major gaps in IBA, resource management, and rural development literature. The principal research question is: How can the structure and governance of IBAs in Canada be designed to effectively maximize community benefits and mitigate adverse impacts? The sub questions are as follows:

1. What analytical frameworks have been used to explain the role of IBAs in resource development and what are the implications of these frameworks for understanding IBAs?;
2. What methodologies have been used to evaluate IBAs to determine if they are effective and what are the strengths and weaknesses of these methodologies?;
3. What methodology is most appropriate for designing and evaluating IBAs to maximize community benefits and mitigate the adverse impacts of resource development?; and
4. What opportunities exist to integrate IBAs into Canada’s IA process and what are the associated costs and benefits for each party involved in the IBA process?

**Methodology:** My methodology will employ five components. First, I will conduct a systematic review of IBA literature focusing on two types: literature that frames and/or applies a theoretical framework to IBAs and literature that evaluates IBAs and/or provides IBA design and negotiation best practices. Second, I will develop a new comprehensive framework, based on a foundation provided by multiple account evaluation (MAE) methodology and informed by IBA evaluation literature, that can be used as to assess community impacts and inform the design and evaluation of any IBAs that a community may negotiate. Third, I will conduct key informant interviews with 20 IBA experts and practitioners. Following expert assessment methodology, participants will first be provided with the new IBA evaluation framework and then, during the interviews, will be asked to evaluate the framework based on a multi-criteria evaluation framework for assessing the efficacy of methodologies and asked to discuss their experiences with designing, negotiating, and studying IBAs. Fourth, I will modify the evaluation framework based on the expert assessment and then test it using a case study approach. The framework will be applied to a single case study: the Mary River Mine. Results from the case study applications will be used to revise the new IBA evaluation framework and develop a list of best practices for improving IBAs. Fifth, I will explore how the Indigenous community MAE framework opportunities on how to integrate IBAs into a more formal government policy framework and assess associated costs and benefits. The current IBA process in Canada is convoluted, with communities often negotiating two separate IBAs for a single project (one with the project developer and one with a senior government) without clear policy guidance. Therefore, an exploration of opportunities and options for integrating IBAs into a more structured governance process is warranted.

**Significance and Policy Implications:** IBAs have emerged as a prominent tool for managing resource development to mitigate adverse effects and generate benefits for impacted communities and Indigenous populations. This project will fill critical IBA knowledge gaps by providing a comprehensive inventory of IBA literature, advancing our understanding of the role of IBAs in sustainable resource development, developing a new MAE framework designed to assess project impacts to Indigenous communities and inform IBA design and negotiation, and exploring opportunities to integrate the MAE framework into Canada’s IA process. The results of this research will advance knowledge and practices regarding resource development and IBAs in Canada and internationally and help promote sustainable development for rural communities impacted by resource development.

Given the importance of the natural resource sector in Canada, and the increasing prevalence of conflicts associated with resource extraction, the development of a comprehensive IBA evaluation framework to analyze and guide development of effective IBAs and an exploration into how IBAs could be integrated into IA are critical research needs. One of the priorities of the Canada’s updated IA Act is to comprehensively assess how projects will impact Indigenous peoples and communities and Indigenous rights and title. IBAs appear to directly influence whether, from the community’s perspective, the project is in the community’s interest. However, explicit recognition of privately negotiated IBAs appear to be missing from the updated IA Act and thereby excluding IBAs from informing the public interest determination for a proposed project. Ideally, the IBA evaluation framework will inform IA policy and ensure that IBAs are given consideration in the IA process, helping add clarity and transparency to determining whether a project is in an Indigenous community’s interest. Additionally, the IBA evaluation framework will serve as an invaluable tool that will facilitate positive IBA outcomes.