



Indigenous
Prosperity
Foundation

Walking Together Tour

Thunder Bay Report

Building Pathways for Indigenous
Prosperity in Northwestern Ontario

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Executive Summary

Introduction: Grounding in Place and Systems

Methodology

Chapter 1: Administrative Complexity as a Primary Barrier

Chapter 2: Fragmented Systems and the Need for Navigation

Chapter 3: Confidence, Belonging, and Early-Stage Barriers

Chapter 4: Access to Capital vs. Readiness

Chapter 5: Mentorship and Trusted Relationships

Chapter 6: Education and Long-Term Pathways

Chapter 7: Redefining Success

Conclusion: Aligning Systems with Reality



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Indigenous Prosperity Foundation (IPF) began its Thunder Bay visit grounded in place, history, and relationship.

An opening afternoon at Fort William Historical Park provided an important foundation for the engagement—reminding us that this region has long been a hub of Indigenous trade, commerce, and economic leadership. Indigenous entrepreneurship in Northwestern Ontario is not new. It is deeply rooted, adaptive, and enduring. This context shaped our subsequent engagement with the Nishnawbe Aski Development Fund (NADF), the Indigenous Financial Institution serving the region. Conversations with NADF reinforced both the strength of the ecosystem and a critical tension: while access to capital exists, many entrepreneurs are not adequately supported in navigating the systems required to access and sustain it.

This visit took place within a region where Indigenous economic contribution is both significant and growing. Indigenous economic activity contributed approximately \$1.55 billion in total economic impact in 2020, including \$742 million in direct output and \$411 million in GDP. Indigenous peoples represent approximately 14% of the population and 10% of the labour force, highlighting both their importance and the opportunity for further growth.

Thunder Bay functions as a critical regional hub for surrounding First Nations, concentrating services, institutions, and economic opportunities. However, despite this strong ecosystem, entrepreneurs continue to face significant barriers in navigating complex, fragmented systems.

KEY FINDINGS FROM THE VISIT INCLUDE:

- Administrative complexity is a primary barrier, often outweighing access to capital
- Supports are fragmented, requiring entrepreneurs to navigate multiple systems independently
- Confidence, belonging, and early exposure are critical gaps, particularly for youth and first-time entrepreneurs
- Mentorship and trusted relationships are more impactful than standalone programs
- The path from “idea to support” is unnecessarily difficult despite a strong ecosystem
- Infrastructure gaps (roads, broadband, supply chains) significantly shape what is economically possible in remote communities
- Success is defined by sustainability and balance, not just growth

This report connects the strength of the regional economy with the lived realities of Indigenous entrepreneurs—and identifies opportunities to better align systems with those realities.



INTRODUCTION: GROUNDING IN PLACE AND SYSTEMS



The Thunder Bay stop of the Walking Together Tour was intentionally grounded in both history and systems.

Beginning at Fort William Historical Park provided a powerful reminder: Indigenous peoples have long been economic leaders in this region. Trade networks, entrepreneurship, and resourcefulness have always been part of the economic fabric of Northwestern Ontario.

Today, this legacy continues within a modern ecosystem of institutions, programs, and supports designed to enable Indigenous entrepreneurship. However, the experience of navigating this ecosystem does not always reflect its intended design. While supports exist across funding, compliance, education, and financial systems, they are often experienced as fragmented, difficult to access, and not fully aligned with the realities of Indigenous entrepreneurs.

This misalignment is not due to a lack of institutional strength. In fact, organizations such as Indigenous Financial Institutions have built deep trust and strong outcomes over decades. The challenge lies in how these systems are connected, accessed, and navigated in practice—particularly for those at the earliest stages of their entrepreneurial journey.

Following this grounding, IPF met with NADF, a cornerstone institution in the Indigenous economic ecosystem. NADF plays a critical role in providing capital and supporting business development.

It represents a trusted anchor within the regional ecosystem, with strong performance and long-standing relationships with entrepreneurs. At the same time, discussions highlighted a structural gap:

- Entrepreneurs often require hands-on support (business planning, accounting, operations) before they are ready for funding
- IFIs are limited in how much developmental support they can provide alongside financing

This creates a gap where entrepreneurs are not yet ready for capital but have nowhere to go to become ready. Compounding this challenge is the reality that many entrepreneurs never reach institutions like NADF in the first place. Early points of contact, such as band offices or community-based supports, are not always equipped with the tools, training, or connections needed to guide individuals into the broader ecosystem

Thunder Bay's role as a regional hub further shapes this dynamic. The city serves communities across Northwestern Ontario, including many remote and northern First Nations.

This creates:

- Opportunity through access to services and markets
- Complexity in navigating multiple institutions and expectations

It also highlights a key distinction between operating environments. While Thunder Bay offers access to services and markets, many surrounding communities face significantly different realities shaped by distance, infrastructure limitations, and higher operating costs. These differences influence how entrepreneurs experience and navigate systems.

The purpose of this engagement was to understand how these systems are experienced in practice.

What emerged was clear:

The challenge is not a lack of opportunity—it is the gap between strong systems and the ability to navigate them. Bridging this gap requires a shift in focus—from creating new programs to strengthening connections, improving entry points, and ensuring that existing systems are accessible, coordinated, and aligned with lived experience.

METHODOLOGY



In advancing the Walking Together Tour, the IPF adopted a methodology centred on direct engagement to ensure that the insights captured reflect the lived realities of Indigenous entrepreneurs and ecosystem partners in Northwestern Ontario.

This approach was designed to prioritize authentic voices, unfiltered experiences, and real-time observations across the entrepreneurship journey—from early-stage ideation to established business operations. Recognizing that meaningful program design must be rooted in lived experience, IPF engaged participants through multiple touchpoints across the region.

ENGAGEMENT APPROACH

The Thunder Bay / Fort William engagement combined several methods to capture a holistic understanding of the regional ecosystem:

- A facilitated roundtable discussion bringing together entrepreneurs and ecosystem partners
- One-on-one meetings with the Indigenous Financial Institution, Nishnawbe Aski Development Fund (NADF), and other regional interest holders
- Direct visits with Indigenous-owned businesses, allowing for observation and conversation within real operating environments

This layered approach ensured that insights were not limited to a single format or perspective but instead reflected both individual experiences and system-level dynamics.

Consistent with IPF's Walking Together approach, engagement was grounded in relationship-building, open dialogue, and creating space for participants to share honestly and without constraint.



SELECTION OF PARTICIPANTS

Participants were intentionally selected to reflect a diverse cross-section of the Indigenous entrepreneurship ecosystem in Northwestern Ontario.

This included:

- Indigenous entrepreneurs at various stages of business development (early-stage and established)
- Artists and sole proprietors operating within the creative economy
- Indigenous organizations and tribal councils supporting economic development
- Financial institutions and lenders, including both Indigenous and mainstream providers
- Education and training providers supporting pathways into entrepreneurship

This diversity ensured that the insights gathered reflect both common systemic challenges and the unique experiences of different sectors and business models.

OBJECTIVE OF ENGAGEMENT

The primary objective of this methodology was to move beyond high-level assumptions and capture a grounded understanding of how systems are experienced in practice.

By engaging participants directly—in both group and one-on-one settings, and in some cases within their own business environments—the IPF was able to:

- Understand the day-to-day realities of running and growing a business
- Identify barriers that are not always visible in program design or policy frameworks
- Explore how entrepreneurs navigate (or struggle to navigate) existing supports
- Observe how cultural values, community context, and economic activity intersect

This approach also created space for participants to share candid reflections on their experiences, including challenges related to confidence, belonging, and navigating complex systems.



OUTCOME

The result of this methodology is a set of insights that are grounded in lived experience and reflective of both individual and systemic realities.

By combining roundtable dialogue, institutional engagement, and direct business visits, this report captures a more complete picture of the Indigenous entrepreneurship landscape in Northwestern Ontario.

These insights form the foundation of this report and are critical in informing the development of programs, partnerships, and strategies that are responsive, practical, and aligned with the needs of Indigenous entrepreneurs in the region.



01

Chapter 1: Administrative Complexity as a Primary Barrier

Administrative requirements shape nearly every aspect of entrepreneurship in Northwestern Ontario, often becoming one of the most significant barriers to starting and sustaining a business. Across conversations, participants consistently emphasized that the most challenging aspect of running a business is not the product, service, or market—it is navigating the systems required to operate within it.

Entrepreneurs described managing multiple layers of administration simultaneously, including tax systems (income tax, HST, payroll), WSIB requirements and forecasting, funding applications and reporting, and ongoing bookkeeping and financial management. While these systems are intended to support accountability and sustainability, in practice they are often experienced as overwhelming, unclear, and difficult to navigate without specialized knowledge or support.

This complexity is further intensified in northern and remote contexts, where administrative systems are layered onto already challenging operating environments. Entrepreneurs are not only navigating tax and compliance requirements but also managing higher costs, limited access to in-person services, and inconsistent broadband connectivity, all of which make basic administrative tasks more difficult to complete. One participant captured this challenge clearly, noting that while they understood the importance of setting aside money for taxes, they still required someone to walk them through the process one-on-one. This reflects a broader reality: access to information alone is insufficient without practical, hands-on guidance.

THE COMPOUNDING NATURE OF ADMINISTRATIVE SYSTEMS

Administrative requirements do not exist in isolation. Instead, they intersect and compound, creating layers of complexity that are particularly difficult for early-stage entrepreneurs, sole proprietors, and those operating seasonal or project-based businesses.



These challenges are further amplified by structural differences between urban and remote operating environments. What may be manageable within Thunder Bay becomes significantly more complex in remote First Nation communities, where access to services, supply chains, and infrastructure is limited. Administrative systems do not currently account for these differences, creating additional barriers for entrepreneurs operating outside urban centres.

Participants highlighted that existing systems are often not designed with their realities in mind. Artists, contractors, and small-scale entrepreneurs frequently operate with fluctuating income, informal business structures, and limited administrative capacity. Standardized requirements—such as forecasting for WSIB or navigating HST payments—can feel misaligned with these business models.

Even basic administrative tasks were described as challenging. Processes that may appear straightforward within institutional systems—such as filing taxes or remitting HST—become significant barriers when guidance is not accessible, language is overly technical, or support is inconsistent.

CHALLENGES IN ACCESSING RELEVANT SUPPORT

A key barrier identified was not just the complexity of the systems themselves, but the difficulty in accessing appropriate and culturally relevant support to navigate them.

Entrepreneurs identified:

- A lack of clear, plain-language guidance across systems
- Limited access to trusted accountants and financial professionals
- High costs associated with external services such as bookkeeping, legal, and accounting support
- A reliance on self-navigation, often through trial and error
- Limited access to local, in-community support, particularly in remote areas where entrepreneurs may not have access to accountants, advisors, or reliable digital tools

This results in entrepreneurs spending significant time attempting to interpret systems that were not designed for ease of use, rather than focusing on growing their businesses.

IMPACTS ON ENTREPRENEURS AND BUSINESS GROWTH

The impact of administrative complexity is both practical and psychological.

From a practical standpoint, entrepreneurs reported:

- Falling behind on compliance requirements
- Delays in accessing funding or scaling operations
- Reduced time available for core business activities

From a psychological standpoint, the effects include:

- Increased stress and overwhelm
- Avoidance of administrative tasks
- Reduced confidence in managing business operations

Over time, these impacts can limit business growth, reduce sustainability, and discourage continued engagement with formal systems.

In some cases, these challenges contribute to businesses stalling after initial launch—not due to a lack of demand or viability, but because entrepreneurs encounter administrative and operational barriers without ongoing support to navigate them.

STRATEGIC OPPORTUNITIES FOR INTERVENTION

1

Simplification of Systems and Language

There is a clear need for plain-language resources that translate complex administrative requirements into accessible, step-by-step guidance. This includes tax systems, WSIB processes, and funding applications.

2

One-on-One Operational Support

Entrepreneurs consistently expressed the need for personalized, hands-on support. Models that provide direct guidance—walking individuals through processes in real time—would significantly improve confidence and compliance.

3

Access to Trusted Professional Networks

Developing curated networks of vetted accountants, bookkeepers, and legal professionals would reduce the burden of finding reliable support and ensure entrepreneurs are connected to services that understand their context.

STRATEGIC OPPORTUNITIES FOR INTERVENTION

4

Alignment with Diverse Business Models

Systems and supports should better reflect the realities of Indigenous entrepreneurs, including sole proprietors, artists, and seasonal businesses. This may include more flexible approaches to reporting, forecasting, and compliance.

5

Integrated Support Models

Administrative support should not be siloed. Integrating financial literacy, bookkeeping, tax guidance, and compliance support into cohesive programs would reduce fragmentation and improve outcomes.

6

Infrastructure-Aware Support Models

Administrative and compliance supports must account for infrastructure realities, particularly in remote communities. This includes designing supports that consider connectivity limitations, travel constraints, and access to local services, ensuring that administrative systems are realistic and accessible across different operating environments.



CONCLUSION



The discussions in Thunder Bay highlight that administrative complexity is not a secondary challenge—it is a central barrier to participation in the economy. Entrepreneurs are not lacking motivation or capability. Rather, they are navigating systems that require a level of expertise, time, and support that is often out of reach. These systems are further constrained by structural and infrastructure-related barriers that fall outside the control of individual entrepreneurs, reinforcing the need for system-level solutions rather than individual adaptation.

Addressing this challenge is not simply about providing more information. It requires a shift toward simplification, relationship-based support, and system design that reflects the realities of those it is intended to serve.

By focusing on reducing administrative burden and strengthening navigation supports, IPF has a clear opportunity to unlock greater participation, sustainability, and success for Indigenous entrepreneurs in the region.



Chapter 2: Fragmented Systems and the Need for Navigation

Northwestern Ontario's entrepreneurship ecosystem is rich in resources and supports, yet many entrepreneurs experience it as difficult to access and navigate in practice. Entrepreneurs emphasized that while a range of programs, organizations, and financial institutions exist, these supports are not connected in a way that is intuitive, coordinated, or accessible.

Participants referenced a broad ecosystem that includes Indigenous Financial Institutions such as the Nishnawbe Aski Development Fund (NADF), Community Futures organizations, mainstream financial institutions, accountants and professional advisors, as well as training and business development programs. Collectively, these supports represent a strong foundation for Indigenous entrepreneurship in the region.

However, from the perspective of entrepreneurs, the ecosystem does not function as a cohesive system. Insights from the entrepreneurs in the region reinforce that the challenge is not a lack of programs or institutions, but a lack of connectivity between them. Supports exist across the region—including in Kenora, Dryden, Fort Frances, Thunder Bay, and at the community level—but they are not linked in a way that creates a clear or accessible pathway for entrepreneurs. Instead, it is experienced as a series of disconnected entry points, each with its own processes, expectations, and requirements.

THE EXPERIENCE OF NAVIGATING FRAGMENTED SYSTEMS

Entrepreneurs described the process of accessing support as time-consuming, repetitive, and often discouraging.

To move through the ecosystem, individuals are required to:

- Repeatedly explain their business, goals, and circumstances to different organizations
- Navigate varying application processes, eligibility criteria, and timelines
- Determine independently which supports are relevant to their stage of business

A critical breakdown occurs at the earliest point of entry. Many entrepreneurs begin their journey at band offices or with local Economic Development Officers (EDOs), but these frontline supports are often under-resourced. Without the necessary tools, training, or connections to the broader ecosystem, entrepreneurs may encounter a dead end at this stage—leaving with the perception that no supports exist, even when they do. This fragmentation places the burden of coordination on the entrepreneur, rather than on the system itself.

One participant captured this need clearly by asking whether there could be a single, trusted point of

contact—someone who understands the ecosystem and can provide clear direction based on where the individual is in their journey

GAPS IN SYSTEM DESIGN AND ACCESSIBILITY

Several key gaps emerged from these discussions:

No Single-Entry Point

There is no centralized place for entrepreneurs to begin their journey or seek guidance. Individuals must rely on informal networks or prior knowledge to identify where to go first.

Limited Visibility of Supports

Many entrepreneurs are unaware of the full range of programs and services available to them. Even when supports exist, they are not always communicated in a clear or accessible way.

Reliance on Personal Networks

Access to opportunities is often dependent on who an entrepreneur knows, rather than a structured and equitable system of support. This creates barriers for individuals who are new to entrepreneurship or who are not already connected within existing networks.

Inconsistent Experience Across Organizations

Each organization operates independently, resulting in varying levels of support, communication, and expectations. This inconsistency can create confusion and reduce trust in the system overall.

Underpowered First Points of Contact

While community-based entry points exist, they are not consistently equipped to guide entrepreneurs effectively. Strengthening the capacity of EDOs and frontline staff is critical, as they often represent the first—and sometimes only—touchpoint for entrepreneurs seeking support.

For the ecosystem, it leads to:

- Duplication of efforts across organizations
- Inefficiencies in service delivery
- Reduced overall impact of existing programs and investments
- Missed economic opportunities due to lack of proactive outreach—particularly in areas such as procurement

Ultimately, even a well-resourced ecosystem cannot achieve its full potential if it is not experienced as accessible and coordinated.

STRATEGIC OPPORTUNITIES FOR INTERVENTION

Addressing fragmentation presents a significant opportunity to strengthen the effectiveness of the Indigenous entrepreneurship ecosystem in the region.

Key opportunities include:

Development of Centralized Navigation Services

Establish a trusted entry point where entrepreneurs can access guidance tailored to their stage of business. This could take the form of a navigator role or coordinated service hub that helps individuals understand where to go, what to access, and how to move forward.

Ecosystem Mapping and Plain-Language Tools

Create clear, accessible maps of available supports, outlining what each organization offers, who it is for, and how to access it. These tools should be designed in plain language and reflect real user journeys.

Relationship-Based Navigation Models

Move beyond transactional referrals toward ongoing, relationship-based support. Entrepreneurs benefit from consistent guidance over time, rather than one-time direction.

IMPACTS ON ENTREPRENEURS AND ECOSYSTEM EFFECTIVENESS

The fragmentation of supports has significant implications for both entrepreneurs and the broader ecosystem.

For entrepreneurs, it results in:

- Delayed access to the right supports
- Increased time and effort spent navigating systems
- Missed opportunities due to lack of awareness or guidance
- Frustration and disengagement



Strengthening Coordination Across Organizations

Explore opportunities to align processes, share information, and reduce duplication across ecosystem partners. Greater coordination would improve the overall experience for entrepreneurs and increase system efficiency.

Reducing the Burden on Entrepreneurs

Shift the responsibility for system navigation away from the individual and toward the ecosystem itself. This includes designing pathways that are intuitive, supported, and responsive to different starting points.

Strengthening the EDO Layer

Invest in training, tools, and direct connections for Economic Development Officers and community-based staff. Enabling these frontline actors to provide informed guidance, make referrals, and support early-stage entrepreneurs would significantly improve system navigation and reduce early disengagement.

Proactive Outreach and Procurement Pathways

Shift from passive program delivery (e.g., posting opportunities online) to active outreach models that connect Indigenous entrepreneurs directly to opportunities—particularly in procurement. This includes working with governments and industry to ensure opportunities are communicated clearly and reach Indigenous communities in a timely and accessible way.



CONCLUSION

The challenge is not the availability of supports—it is the ability to access and navigate them effectively. Entrepreneurs are operating within an ecosystem that is rich in resources but fragmented in delivery. Without clear pathways, even the most motivated individuals can struggle to move forward. This is not a failure of entrepreneurs, but of system design—where strong institutions and programs exist, but are not experienced as accessible due to weak connections, limited coordination, and under-resourced entry points.

By focusing on navigation, coordination, and accessibility, the IPF has an opportunity to transform how the ecosystem is experienced, shifting from a collection of disconnected services to a cohesive system that supports entrepreneurs at every stage of their journey.

Chapter 3: Confidence, Belonging, and Early-Stage Barriers

A key insight emerging from the IPF's engagement in Thunder Bay is that the barriers to entrepreneurship are not solely technical—they are deeply human. Beyond access to capital, training, or infrastructure, many Indigenous entrepreneurs face challenges related to confidence, belonging, and their sense of readiness to participate in business systems.

Participants consistently spoke to a lack of confidence, fear of making mistakes, and uncertainty about where to begin. These experiences are often compounded by limited exposure to entrepreneurship pathways and, in some cases, experiences of racism or exclusion within mainstream business and educational environments.

For many individuals, the challenge is not a lack of ambition or ideas, but a lack of familiarity with the systems and spaces in which entrepreneurship takes place. As a result, business environments can feel inaccessible or unwelcoming, creating an additional barrier to entry.

THE ROLE OF BELONGING IN ENTREPRENEURSHIP

A strong sense of belonging emerged as a foundational factor in whether individuals engage with entrepreneurship supports.

Participants highlighted that when individuals do not see themselves reflected in business spaces—or when

they feel judged, unwelcome, or out of place—they are less likely to take the first step. This is particularly true for youth and first-time entrepreneurs who may already feel uncertain about their abilities or knowledge. It is further compounded when individuals do not have access to trusted intermediaries—such as mentors or community-based supports—who can help them interpret systems, validate their ideas, and connect them to opportunities.

Creating environments where Indigenous entrepreneurs feel seen, supported, and understood is critical. Without this foundation, even well-designed programs and supports may fail to reach those who need them most.

YOUTH AND EARLY-STAGE BARRIERS

These challenges are especially pronounced among youth and early-stage entrepreneurs.

Participants identified several key gaps:

- Limited early exposure to entrepreneurship and trades
- A lack of clear, accessible entry points into business pathways
- Insufficient long-term support to guide individuals beyond initial interest
- Limited access to real-time, relationship-based guidance that helps individuals move from interest

to action (e.g., making introductions, referrals, or advocating on their behalf)

For many young people, entrepreneurship is not presented as a viable or accessible option. Where programs do exist, they are often short-term and disconnected from longer-term pathways, making it difficult to sustain engagement or build meaningful skills over time.

There is a clear need for grassroots, community-based approaches that introduce entrepreneurship early, build confidence gradually, and provide consistent support as individuals move through different stages of their journey.

THE LIMITATIONS OF SHORT-TERM PROGRAMMING

A recurring theme was that short-term programming—often limited to a few weeks or months—is insufficient to support meaningful entrepreneurial development.

While these programs can provide valuable exposure and initial skills, they do not address the deeper needs identified by participants, including:

- Building confidence over time
- Developing trust in systems and support providers
- Navigating challenges as they arise in real-world business contexts

They also do not replicate the informal support systems that many successful entrepreneurs rely on—where someone provides direct guidance, shares connections, or helps navigate key decisions in real time. Entrepreneurs emphasized the importance of continuity—having access to support that extends beyond the duration of a program and evolves with their needs.

THE IMPORTANCE OF RELATIONSHIP-BASED SUPPORT

Underlying these insights is a clear message: relationships matter. As reinforced through additional discussions, entrepreneurs who are able to progress often do so because someone actively supports them—whether by answering questions, making a connection, or advocating on their behalf. Access to this kind of support is inconsistent, but where it exists, it significantly improves outcomes.

Entrepreneurs are not only seeking information or training—they are seeking:

- Guidance from trusted individuals
- Encouragement during periods of uncertainty
- Support that is responsive and adaptable

Trust is built over time, and effective support models must reflect this. Relationship-based approaches—where individuals have consistent points of contact and ongoing mentorship—are far more impactful than one-time interventions.

STRATEGIC OPPORTUNITIES FOR INTERVENTION

Addressing confidence, belonging, and early-stage barriers requires a shift toward more holistic, human-centred approaches to entrepreneurship support.

Key opportunities include:

Development of Youth Entrepreneurship Pathways

Create structured pathways that introduce entrepreneurship and trades early, with programming that is culturally relevant, accessible, and connected to long-term opportunities.

Confidence-Building and Foundational Programming

Design programs that prioritize confidence, self-efficacy, and practical exposure, rather than assuming a baseline level of readiness.

Grassroots, Community-Based Entry Points

Deliver programming in community settings where individuals feel comfortable and supported, reducing barriers to initial engagement.

Long-Term, Wraparound Support Models

Move beyond short-term programming toward ongoing support that evolves with the entrepreneur's journey, providing continuity and stability.

Culturally Safe and Inclusive Environments

Ensure that entrepreneurship spaces reflect Indigenous values, experiences, and perspectives, fostering a sense of belonging and trust.

Embedding Advocacy and Navigation into Early-Stage Support

Ensure that early-stage programming includes active navigation support—such as making referrals, facilitating introductions, and helping individuals access opportunities—rather than relying solely on self-directed participation.





CONCLUSION

These discussions reinforce that entrepreneurship is not only a technical process—it is a personal journey shaped by confidence, identity, and belonging.

Without addressing these human dimensions, even the most robust systems and programs will fall short. These human dimensions are closely tied to system design. When systems are difficult to access or navigate, they reinforce feelings of exclusion and uncertainty. Conversely, when individuals are supported through relationships and clear pathways, confidence and participation increase.

By investing in confidence-building, fostering inclusive environments, and creating long-term pathways for engagement, the IPF has an opportunity to support not only the development of businesses but the empowerment of individuals to see themselves as entrepreneurs.

Chapter 4: Access to Capital vs. Readiness

Access to capital in Northwestern Ontario is not the primary challenge—rather, it is the gap between funding requirements and entrepreneur readiness that creates barriers to participation. While funding opportunities exist through Indigenous Financial Institutions, mainstream banks, and other programs, many entrepreneurs are not positioned to meet the requirements needed to access that capital.

Participants consistently highlighted that the challenge is not simply access to funding—it is navigating the processes and expectations that come with it. This challenge is further shaped by structural realities that fall outside the scope of funding itself. In many cases, infrastructure limitations—such as unreliable broadband, transportation barriers, and supply chain constraints—directly impact whether businesses can operate successfully, regardless of access to capital.

Entrepreneurs are often required to demonstrate a level of business readiness that includes formal business plans, financial projections, and compliance with various administrative and regulatory requirements. For many, particularly those in early stages or operating small-scale businesses, these expectations can feel complex, burdensome, and misaligned with their current capacity.

THE GAP BETWEEN EXPECTATIONS AND REALITY

Loan applications and funding processes are structured around a model of preparedness that assumes a certain level of knowledge, experience, and administrative capacity.

In practice, many entrepreneurs are still developing:

- Foundational business knowledge
- Financial literacy and confidence
- Operational systems and processes

These gaps are not simply a function of individual readiness but reflect broader system misalignment. Entrepreneurs are often expected to meet standardized funding criteria that do not account for the realities of operating in remote or underserved contexts.

As a result, the process of applying for funding can become a barrier rather than an opportunity. Entrepreneurs may feel discouraged by the level of documentation required or uncertain about how to develop the materials needed to be considered eligible.

At the same time, Indigenous Financial Institutions such as NADF play a critical role in supporting entrepreneurs but operate within constraints that limit the extent of hands-on support they can provide. This creates a structural tension: while IFIs are positioned as both funders and supporters, they are not always resourced to guide entrepreneurs through the full process of becoming funding ready.

THE EXPERIENCE OF ENTREPRENEURS

From the perspective of entrepreneurs, this dynamic creates a clear disconnect.

Systems are designed with the expectation that individuals will arrive ready—with a business plan, financial projections, and a clear understanding of compliance requirements. However, many entrepreneurs are still in the process of learning these elements in real time.

This results in:

- Difficulty completing applications
- Delays in accessing funding
- Frustration with processes that feel inaccessible
- Decisions to seek alternative, and sometimes less suitable, financing options

In addition, a critical gap emerges after funding is received. Entrepreneurs may successfully secure capital and launch their businesses, but when they encounter operational challenges—such as supply chain disruptions, staffing issues, or market shifts—there is often no ongoing support to help them adapt. These businesses are not failing due to lack of viability, but because they are navigating complex challenges without access to continued guidance. In some cases, the effort required to meet funding requirements can outweigh the perceived benefit, particularly when entrepreneurs are balancing immediate operational demands.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE ECOSYSTEM

This disconnect has broader implications for the effectiveness of the entrepreneurship ecosystem.

When readiness and access are misaligned:

- Entrepreneurs who could benefit from funding are unable to access it
- Financial institutions receive applications that are incomplete or not yet viable
- Opportunities for business growth and job creation are delayed or lost
- Businesses that receive funding may stall or fail post-launch due to a lack of ongoing operational support, reducing the long-term impact of capital investments

The result is an ecosystem where capital exists, but its impact is limited by the absence of sufficient preparation and support mechanisms.

STRATEGIC OPPORTUNITIES FOR INTERVENTION

1

Integrating Funding with Operational Support

Pair access to capital with hands-on support that helps entrepreneurs develop the materials and systems required for funding readiness. This includes business planning, financial management, and compliance support.

2

Expanding Access to Professional Services

Provide entrepreneurs with access to trusted professionals—such as accountants, bookkeepers, legal advisors, and marketing experts—who can support key aspects of business development and reduce the burden on the individual.

3

Simplifying Application Processes

Explore opportunities to streamline funding applications, reduce unnecessary complexity, and provide clearer guidance on requirements. Plain-language tools and step-by-step support can significantly improve accessibility.

4

Creating Staged Pathways to Capital

Develop tiered approaches that allow entrepreneurs to access smaller amounts of funding earlier in their journey, alongside support to build toward larger-scale financing over time.

STRATEGIC OPPORTUNITIES FOR INTERVENTION

5

Strengthening Pre-Funding Readiness Programs

Invest in programs specifically designed to prepare entrepreneurs for funding, ensuring they have the knowledge, tools, and confidence needed to engage successfully with financial institutions.

6

Post-Funding Support and Business Continuity

Develop support models that extend beyond funding, providing entrepreneurs with access to ongoing advisory services, mentorship, and problem-solving support as they navigate real-world business challenges after launch.

7

Infrastructure-Informed Program Design

Ensure that funding and support programs account for the realities of operating in northern and remote communities, including transportation, connectivity, and supply chain limitations. Aligning program expectations with these conditions will improve accessibility and long-term success.

CONCLUSION

Access to capital, while essential, is not sufficient on its own. Without alignment between funding requirements and entrepreneur readiness, capital cannot reach its full potential as a driver of Indigenous economic growth.

By focusing on readiness, support, and simplification, IPF has an opportunity to bridge this gap—ensuring that entrepreneurs are not only able to access capital but are positioned to use it effectively and sustainably. This includes recognizing that capital alone is insufficient without the infrastructure, relationships, and ongoing support systems required to sustain and grow a business over time.



Chapter 5: Mentorship and Trusted Relationships

Across all discussions, one theme emerged with clarity and consistency: **People need people.**

While programs, funding, and tools are important, participants emphasized that the most impactful support comes through relationships—specifically, access to trusted individuals who can provide guidance, share experience, and offer support over time. This insight is reinforced by broader ecosystem perspectives: entrepreneurs consistently achieve better outcomes when they have access to someone who can guide them in real time—whether by answering questions, making introductions, or helping them navigate key decisions.

Entrepreneurs highlighted that navigating business systems, making decisions, and building confidence are significantly easier when they are not doing it alone. Mentorship, in its various forms, plays a critical role in bridging gaps that formal programs often cannot address.

WHAT WORKS: RELATIONSHIP-BASED SUPPORT

Participants identified several forms of support that are currently effective:

One-on-One Mentorship

Direct, individualized guidance allows entrepreneurs to ask questions, work through challenges, and receive advice tailored to their specific circumstances.

Peer Networks

Connecting with other entrepreneurs creates opportunities to share experiences, normalize challenges, and learn from others at similar stages of their journey.

Trusted Advisors

Relationships with individuals who have relevant expertise—whether in business, finance, or specific industries—provide critical insight and reassurance.

In addition to formal mentorship structures, an informal network of peer support exists across the region. Entrepreneurs often rely on one another to share information, recommend services, and provide guidance. While highly effective, this network is not formally supported or accessible to all, creating uneven access to these benefits.

These forms of support are effective because they are relational, responsive, and grounded in trust. They allow entrepreneurs to engage in a way that feels safe, supportive, and practical.

WHAT'S MISSING: CONTINUITY AND ACCESSIBILITY

Despite the value of mentorship, participants identified significant gaps in how it is currently structured and accessed.

Key challenges include:

Lack of Continuity

Many mentorship opportunities are short-term or tied to specific programs, limiting the ability to build sustained relationships. Entrepreneurs often move from one advisor to another, without consistent support over time.

Limited Cultural and Sector-Specific Expertise

Access to mentors who understand both Indigenous contexts and specific industries (such as trades, arts, or construction) is limited. This can reduce the relevance and effectiveness of the guidance provided.

Barriers to Accessing Networks

Mentorship opportunities are often informal or relationship-based, making them difficult to access for individuals who are not already connected within existing networks.

Limited ability to access “warm introductions” or direct referrals, which often determine whether entrepreneurs are able to connect with the right supports at the right time.

As a result, entrepreneurs described a desire for a more consistent and reliable form of support—one where they could turn to a single, trusted advisor rather than navigating multiple disconnected contacts.

THE ROLE OF TRUST IN ENTREPRENEURIAL SUCCESS

Trust emerged as a foundational element of effective mentorship.

Entrepreneurs are more likely to seek guidance, ask questions, and act on advice when they feel:

- Understood
- Respected
- Supported without judgment

Building this level of trust requires time and continuity. It also requires proximity to relevant knowledge and networks. Entrepreneurs are more likely to act on guidance when it comes from individuals who understand their context and can connect them directly to opportunities or resources.

It cannot be achieved through one-time interactions or transactional relationships. This reinforces the importance of designing support models that prioritize long-term engagement and relationship-building.

STRATEGIC OPPORTUNITIES FOR INTERVENTION

Strengthening mentorship and relationship-based support represents a significant opportunity to enhance the effectiveness of the entrepreneurship ecosystem in Thunder Bay.

Key opportunities include:

1

Development of Structured Mentorship Networks

Establish formal mentorship programs that connect entrepreneurs with experienced mentors, ensuring consistent access to guidance across different stages of business development.

2

Creation of Curated Professional Directories

Develop accessible, vetted directories of trusted professionals—including accountants, legal advisors, and industry experts—who understand the context and needs of Indigenous entrepreneurs.

3

Long-Term, Relationship-Based Support Models

Move beyond short-term mentorship engagements toward models that provide ongoing support, allowing relationships to develop over time and adapt to evolving needs.

4

Peer-to-Peer Learning and Networking Opportunities

Facilitate spaces where entrepreneurs can connect, share experiences, and learn from one another in a supportive and collaborative environment.

STRATEGIC OPPORTUNITIES FOR INTERVENTION

5

Culturally Grounded Mentorship Approaches

Ensure mentorship models reflect Indigenous values, emphasizing relational accountability, reciprocity, and community connection.

6

Formalizing Informal Networks

Build on the strength of existing peer-to-peer networks by creating structured opportunities for connection, knowledge-sharing, and collaboration. Formalizing these networks would increase accessibility while preserving the relational strengths that make them effective.

7

Enabling Warm Referral Pathways

Design systems that facilitate direct connections between entrepreneurs, mentors, and service providers. Moving beyond static directories toward active referral models would significantly improve access to relevant support.



CONCLUSION

Mentorship is not an “add-on” to entrepreneurship support—it is foundational. Entrepreneurs are not only seeking knowledge; they are seeking connection, guidance, and trust.

By investing in mentorship networks and relationship-based support systems, IPF has an opportunity to strengthen not only individual businesses but the broader ecosystem—creating a more connected, supportive, and resilient environment for Indigenous entrepreneurship. This includes recognizing that relationships are not supplementary to programs—they are the mechanism through which programs become effective, accessible, and impactful.





06

Chapter 6: Education and Long-Term Pathways

Education emerged as a foundational pillar of Indigenous prosperity throughout the IPF's engagement in the region. Participants consistently emphasized that entrepreneurship does not begin at the point of business creation—it begins much earlier, through exposure, learning, and the development of confidence.

This early-stage development is also dependent on access to the tools and infrastructure required to participate in modern learning environments. Without reliable digital access, devices, and connectivity, many individuals are unable to fully engage in education and training opportunities that support entrepreneurship pathways.

Insights from regional partners, including education and training providers, highlighted the critical role of Indigenous-led curriculum in shaping meaningful and accessible pathways for learners. These approaches prioritize self-determination, cultural relevance, and flexibility, creating environments where individuals can engage in education in ways that reflect their lived realities.

At the same time, participants identified significant barriers that continue to impact access to education and, by extension, participation in entrepreneurship.

BARRIERS TO ACCESS AND PARTICIPATION

For many learners—particularly those from northern and remote communities—accessing education requires navigating complex transitions.

Participants highlighted several key challenges:

- Geographic barriers that require relocation to urban centres such as Thunder Bay
- Financial constraints related to travel, housing, and cost of living
- Experiences of culture shock and isolation when leaving home communities
- Difficulty navigating unfamiliar institutional systems
- Limited access to reliable digital infrastructure, including devices, connectivity, and tools needed to participate in education and training programs

These barriers extend beyond the classroom and have a direct impact on an individual's ability to pursue entrepreneurship. In many cases, the digital divide is not only experienced by learners but also by those supporting them. Community-based staff and Economic Development Officers may lack the hardware, software, and connectivity required to effectively guide individuals through education and entrepreneurship pathways. Without adequate support during these transitions, learners may struggle to complete programs or fully engage in opportunities available to them.



THE IMPORTANCE OF INDIGENOUS-LED EDUCATION MODELS

Indigenous-led curriculum and programming were identified as critical components of effective education pathways.

These models:

- Reflect Indigenous values, knowledge systems, and ways of learning
- Support self-determination and flexibility in educational journeys
- Create culturally safe environments where learners feel supported and understood

Participants emphasized that education systems designed and delivered by Indigenous organizations are better positioned to meet the needs of their communities and to connect learning with broader goals of economic participation and community well-being.

BRIDGING EDUCATION AND ENTREPRENEURSHIP

A key insight from discussions is that entrepreneurship should not be viewed as a standalone outcome, but as part of a broader continuum that begins with education.

Entrepreneurship is built through:

- Early exposure to business concepts and opportunities
- Development of practical skills and financial literacy
- Confidence gained through learning and experience

However, these elements are increasingly dependent on digital access and tools. Entrepreneurs who are able to leverage digital platforms, AI tools, and online systems operate at a significantly different level than those without access, creating a widening gap in opportunity and capability.

When these elements are present, individuals are better prepared to pursue entrepreneurship as a viable and accessible pathway.

However, current systems often lack clear connections between education, workforce development, and entrepreneurship. This disconnect can result in missed opportunities to support individuals as they transition from learning into economic participation.

STRATEGIC OPPORTUNITIES FOR INTERVENTION

Strengthening education and long-term pathways presents a significant opportunity to support Indigenous entrepreneurship in Thunder Bay.

Key opportunities include:

1

Strengthening Education-to-Entrepreneurship Pathways

Develop clear, connected pathways that link education, skills development, and entrepreneurship. This includes integrating entrepreneurship into educational programming and providing opportunities for practical application.

2

Supporting Northern and Remote Learners

Invest in supports that address the unique challenges faced by learners from northern communities, including housing, cultural safety, mentorship, and navigation assistance.

3

Aligning Training with Real-World Business Needs

Ensure that training programs reflect the realities of entrepreneurship, including administrative requirements, financial management, and sector-specific skills.

4

Expanding Flexible and Hybrid Learning Models

Support models that combine in-person and remote learning, allowing individuals to access education without fully relocating or disconnecting from their communities.

STRATEGIC OPPORTUNITIES FOR INTERVENTION

5

Culturally Grounded Mentorship Approaches

Ensure mentorship models reflect Indigenous values, emphasizing relational accountability, reciprocity, and community connection.

6

Formalizing Informal Networks

Build on the strength of existing peer-to-peer networks by creating structured opportunities for connection, knowledge-sharing, and collaboration. Formalizing these networks would increase accessibility while preserving the relational strengths that make them effective.

7

Enabling Warm Referral Pathways

Design systems that facilitate direct connections between entrepreneurs, mentors, and service providers. Moving beyond static directories toward active referral models would significantly improve access to relevant support.

CONCLUSION

Mentorship is not an “add-on” to entrepreneurship support—it is foundational. Entrepreneurs are not only seeking knowledge; they are seeking connection, guidance, and trust.

By investing in mentorship networks and relationship-based support systems, IPF has an opportunity to strengthen not only individual businesses but the broader ecosystem—creating a more connected, supportive, and resilient environment for Indigenous entrepreneurship. This includes recognizing that relationships are not supplementary to programs—they are the mechanism through which programs become effective, accessible, and impactful.



Chapter 7: Redefining Success

Indigenous entrepreneurs are redefining success in ways that challenge conventional models of growth and expansion. Contrary to conventional models that emphasize rapid growth, scale, and expansion, entrepreneurs described success in more grounded, holistic, and sustainable terms.

For many, success is not defined by how quickly a business grows, but by its ability to sustain itself over time while supporting the well-being of the individual, their family, and their community.

Participants described success as:

- The ability to generate stable and reliable income
- Achieving a healthy balance between work, family, and community responsibilities
- Maintaining and continuing cultural practices alongside business activities
- Reducing stress and financial uncertainty

This perspective reflects a broader understanding of prosperity—one that prioritizes long-term stability and quality of life over short-term growth.

CHALLENGING CONVENTIONAL MODELS OF SUCCESS

A key tension identified through discussions is the misalignment between how success is defined within systems and how it is experienced by entrepreneurs.

Many programs, funding models, and institutional frameworks are designed with an emphasis on:

- Scaling businesses rapidly
- Increasing revenue and employment
- Expanding into new markets

While these outcomes are valuable in certain contexts, they do not always reflect the goals or realities of Indigenous entrepreneurs in the region. In many cases, expectations of scale and expansion are not aligned with local operating conditions, particularly in communities where infrastructure limitations and smaller market sizes influence what is feasible and sustainable.

Participants emphasized that growth, when it occurs, must be intentional and manageable. Rapid expansion can introduce additional risks, increase administrative burden, and disrupt the balance that entrepreneurs are working to maintain.



THE IMPORTANCE OF STABILITY AND AUTONOMY

Entrepreneurs consistently identified stability and autonomy as central to their definition of success.

Stability provides:

- Predictable income
- Reduced financial stress
- The ability to plan for the future

In regions where supply chains, transportation, and connectivity are inconsistent, stability becomes even more critical. Entrepreneurs must often account for variables outside their control, reinforcing the importance of business models that prioritize resilience over rapid expansion.

Autonomy allows entrepreneurs to:

- Make decisions aligned with their values
- Maintain control over their time and operations
- Balance business responsibilities with family and community commitments

These priorities highlight the importance of designing systems that support sustainable growth rather than imposing expectations of scale.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAM AND SYSTEM DESIGN

The reframing of success has important implications for how entrepreneurship programs and supports are designed and evaluated.

When success is measured primarily through growth metrics, it can:

- Exclude businesses that are intentionally small or community-focused
- Place pressure on entrepreneurs to expand beyond their capacity
- Overlook meaningful outcomes related to well-being and cultural continuity
- Fail to account for regional and infrastructure constraints that shape what sustainable success looks like in practice

Aligning systems with the realities of Indigenous entrepreneurship requires a broader understanding of impact—one that values sustainability, resilience, and quality of life.

STRATEGIC OPPORTUNITIES FOR INTERVENTION

There is a clear opportunity to realign programs and supports with the definitions of success identified by participants.

Key opportunities include:

1

Redefining Success Metrics

Expand evaluation frameworks to include indicators such as business sustainability, income stability, work-life balance, and community impact, alongside traditional growth metrics.

2

Designing for Sustainable Growth

Develop programs that support gradual, manageable growth, allowing entrepreneurs to scale at a pace that aligns with their capacity and goals.

3

Supporting Diverse Business Models

Recognize and support a range of business types, including sole proprietorships, lifestyle businesses, and community-oriented enterprises, without imposing expectations of expansion.

4

Integrating Well-Being into Program Design

Ensure that supports consider the holistic well-being of entrepreneurs, including mental health, family responsibilities, and cultural commitments.

STRATEGIC OPPORTUNITIES FOR INTERVENTION

5

Aligning Funding Structures with Sustainability

Adapt funding models to support long-term stability rather than short-term outputs, including flexible funding that allows entrepreneurs to prioritize sustainability.

6

Context-Aware Program and Funding Design

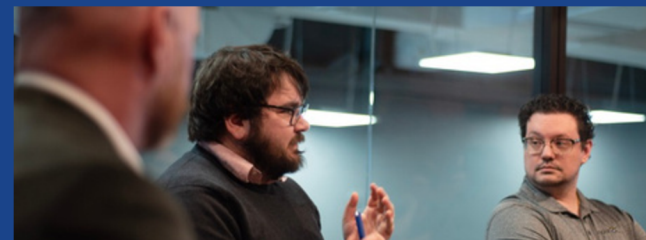
Ensure that program expectations and funding models are grounded in the realities of different operating environments, particularly in northern and remote communities where growth trajectories and business models may differ significantly from urban contexts.

CONCLUSION

The discussions in Thunder Bay underscore the need to rethink how success is defined within Indigenous entrepreneurship.

Success is not one-dimensional. It is not solely measured by revenue or scale. It is reflected in the ability of entrepreneurs to build stable, meaningful, and sustainable livelihoods that align with their values and responsibilities.

By embracing this broader definition of success, IPF has an opportunity to lead in shaping systems that truly support Indigenous prosperity—grounded not only in economic outcomes but in well-being, autonomy, and cultural continuity. This includes recognizing that sustainable success is deeply connected to the conditions in which businesses operate, and that aligning systems with these realities is essential to supporting long-term prosperity.



Conclusion: Aligning Systems with Reality

The insights gathered through the Thunder Bay engagement point to a clear and consistent reality: Indigenous entrepreneurs are navigating systems that do not fully align with how they live, work, and build.

Entrepreneurs in the region are capable, motivated, and deeply resilient. They are building businesses, supporting their families, and contributing to their communities, often while navigating significant barriers. However, they are doing so within systems that are complex, fragmented, and not designed to reflect their realities.

In many cases, the strongest institutions are not the issue—organizations like Indigenous Financial Institutions are trusted and effective—but too many entrepreneurs never reach them due to weak entry points and limited system navigation support. This misalignment creates unnecessary friction—slowing progress, limiting access to opportunities, and placing an additional burden on individuals who are already navigating multiple responsibilities.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Several core themes emerged consistently throughout the engagement:

Simplification is essential

Reducing complexity across administrative, funding, and support systems is critical to improving accessibility and participation.

Navigation is more valuable than information

Entrepreneurs do not need more programs—they need clear, trusted guidance to help them move through existing systems.

Relationships drive success

Mentorship, trust, and consistent human connection are foundational to effective support.

Confidence and belonging are foundational

Without addressing these human dimensions, technical supports alone will not achieve meaningful impact.

First points of contact must be strengthened

Community-level entry points, such as Economic Development Officers, play a critical role in connecting entrepreneurs to the ecosystem. Without adequate tools, training, and support, these entry points can become barriers rather than bridges.

Infrastructure is foundational, not secondary

Access to reliable broadband, transportation, and supply chains directly determines what types of businesses can operate and succeed, particularly in remote communities.

Opportunities exist but are not reaching communities

Significant economic opportunities—particularly in procurement—are not consistently reaching Indigenous entrepreneurs due to a lack of proactive outreach and system coordination.

Together, these insights point to the need for a shift—from designing systems based on assumptions, to designing them based on lived experience.



A FIVE-YEAR VISION FOR INDIGENOUS ENTREPRENEURSHIP IN THE REGION

Looking ahead, participants shared a vision of what success could look like if systems were better aligned with the needs of Indigenous entrepreneurs.

In five years, success is defined by:

- Entrepreneurs navigating systems with clarity, confidence, and support
- Clear and connected pathways from early exposure to business growth
- Youth engaging with entrepreneurship as an accessible and viable option
- Strong, interconnected Indigenous-led networks supporting collaboration and shared success
- Systems and programs designed around real lived experience, rather than institutional assumptions
- Strengthened community-based entry points, where entrepreneurs can access informed, connected support from the outset of their journey
- Indigenous entrepreneurs actively participating in major economic opportunities, including procurement and regional development projects
- Communities equipped with the digital infrastructure and tools required to fully participate in modern economies

The path forward does not require building entirely new systems—it requires connecting, strengthening, and aligning what already exists. By focusing on navigation, relationships, infrastructure, and access to opportunity, there is a clear path to unlocking the full potential of Indigenous entrepreneurship in the region.



Thank you for supporting the Walk Together initiative and helping us capture these important stories. Please feel free to reach out at any time if you have questions or need additional information.



Indigenous
Prosperity
Foundation



info@indigenous**foundation**.ca



indigenous**foundation**.ca



338 Somerset St. West Ottawa, ON K2P 0J9

The Indigenous Prosperity **Foundation** is a Canadian charitable organization supporting early-stage Indigenous entrepreneurs.

Follow our journey: @indigenousprosperity



YouTube