



NIEDB Case Study

Cree Nation–Led Co-Development in Practice:

Lessons from La Grande Alliance Communications and Engagement Phase

1. Introduction: Setting a New Standard for Co-Development

The National Indigenous Economic Development Board (NIEDB) works to advance policies and practices that support Indigenous self-determination, long-term prosperity, and economic reconciliation. Central to this mandate is promoting co-development processes that are Indigenous-led, community-driven, transparent, and grounded in respect for Indigenous rights and knowledge.

On September 23rd 2025, the NIEDB met with Cree leadership to deepen its understanding of how these principles can be put into practice. The discussion focused on the Cree Nation’s approach to economic development, infrastructure planning, and environmental stewardship.

This case study documents why the NIEDB believes that Cree Nation’s approach represents a strong and replicable example of good co-development, and highlights key lessons for governments, developers, and Indigenous communities across Canada.

A distinguishing feature of the Cree Nation’s experience is the evolution of its government-to-government relationship with Quebec.

Rather than approaching major infrastructure planning solely through project-specific consultations, the Cree Nation and the province of Quebec have increasingly worked through formal agreements and collaborative planning mechanisms.

This relationship reflects a shift from adversarial decision-making toward partnership-based governance, where both parties recognize the importance of long-term economic development.

The Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) supporting the La Grande Alliance feasibility process is an example of this approach¹.

The Cree–Quebec relationship demonstrates that successful co-development depends not only on engagement between communities and project proponents, but also on strong provincial-Indigenous relationships built on trust, mutual respect, and long-term commitments.

¹ Memorandum of Understanding (MOU): A formal agreement that establishes shared objectives, roles, responsibilities, and principles for collaboration between parties. While not necessarily legally binding in the same way as a contract, an MOU provides a framework for cooperation and accountability.



2. Cree Vision: Long-Term Community Development

Grand Chief Paul John Murdoch joined the NIEDB meeting alongside representatives of the Cree Nation Government and the Grand Council of the Cree. He emphasized a clear strategic direction:

- Moving away from short-term, program-based development
- Advancing long-term, stable investments that align with Cree community needs
- Ensuring economic development strengthens communities rather than imposing external priorities

The Cree Nation is pursuing a unified economic strategy grounded in:

- Collaboration across communities and regions
- Local empowerment and Indigenous ownership
- Visibility and market access for Indigenous businesses
- Shared standards and inclusive partnerships

This vision places Cree communities not as stakeholders reacting to proposals, but as rights holders actively shaping development pathways.

3. La Grande Alliance: A Cree-Led Engagement Model

At its core, La Grande Alliance is a Cree-led feasibility and planning initiative exploring transportation infrastructure options in Eeyou Istchee.

From the outset, the Cree Nation, through the Cree Development Corporation (CDC), designed the process to ensure that engagement happened before decisions, not after.

The Communications Phase (January 2023 – March 2024) was particularly significant. As documented in the LGA Communications Report, this phase included:

- A comprehensive communications plan developed early in the process
- A network of Community Information Officers (CIOs)² embedded in each of the 10 participating Cree communities.
- Engagement conducted in Cree and English, respecting language and cultural context

² Community Information Officers (CIOs): Local representatives who provide information, facilitate dialogue, gather feedback, and act as a bridge between project teams and community members. The Cree Development Corporation is funding the hiring of 10 Grande Alliance Community Information Officers through local band offices, whose job was to organize consultations and discussions with Cree land users, community groups such as youth and women's associations, economic groups and individual citizens



- Public meetings, focus groups, land-user sessions, youth presentations, and surveys
- Ongoing adaptation of methods in response to community feedback

Over the course of the process:

- More than 120 presentations were held
- 235 interviews were conducted
- 98 traplines³ were directly engaged
- Elders, youth, women, tallymen⁴, businesses, and regional organizations were included

This scale and depth of engagement allowed the LGA team to build a clear, community-by-community understanding of perspectives on the overall initiative and on specific infrastructure components.

4. Key Co-Development Principles in Practice

a) Indigenous Leadership and Ownership

The LGA process was Cree-led at every stage. Engagement data, records, and feedback tools were Cree-owned and used to support Cree decision-making.

This shifted the dynamic from consultation to co-creation. For governments this demonstrates the importance of supporting Indigenous institutions when undertaking major planning or feasibility work, rather than substituting for them.

b) Engagement on Community Timelines

One of the most notable observations shared with the NIEDB was the Cree Nation's approach to environmental and infrastructure review timelines. Rather than following industry-imposed

³ A trapline is a defined area of land traditionally used and managed by an Indigenous family or land user for hunting, trapping, fishing, gathering, and other cultural activities. In Eeyou Istchee (the Cree territory of northern Quebec), traplines are family-managed territories that form part of the Cree land stewardship system and are central to Cree culture, governance, and identity.

⁴ Tallymen are Cree land stewards and family hunting territory managers who hold extensive knowledge of local ecosystems, wildlife, and land-use practices. In the Cree Nation context, tallymen play a critical role in co-development because they are both land stewards and knowledge holders responsible for family hunting territories, known as traplines. Their involvement helps ensure that development decisions are informed by deep, place-based knowledge accumulated over generations. The involvement of tallymen also improves project legitimacy, strengthens environmental assessment, supports Indigenous rights, and helps create development pathways that are both economically and culturally sustainable.



schedules, the Cree Nation allowed communities time to reflect, recognized varied levels of readiness across communities, and accepted that trust-building is iterative and non-linear

Importantly, Grand Chief Murdoch emphasized that processes often advanced more quickly when guided by community priorities, not slower, demonstrating that Indigenous-led timelines can be both rigorous and efficient.

c) Respect for Land Users and Indigenous Knowledge

The LGA engagement process placed tallymen and land users at the center of discussions. Concerns around traplines, wildlife, water, climate change, and cumulative impacts were not treated as obstacles, but as essential design considerations. Communities expressed optimism that:

- Infrastructure could improve safety and connectivity
- Economic benefits could coexist with cultural protection
- Mitigation measures could be designed collaboratively

This reinforces the principle that Indigenous knowledge strengthens project outcomes, rather than delaying them.

d) Transparency and Capacity Building

A consistent message across communities was the need for transparency:

Common questions posed were:

- Who owns the process?
- How are decisions made?
- What happens if communities disagree?

The LGA team responded by:

- Making information publicly accessible
- Clearly distinguishing feasibility studies from construction decisions
- Investing in community capacity to understand technical material

This approach demonstrates that transparency is not a one-time disclosure, but an ongoing relationship.



5. Cree Development Corporation (CDC): Enabling Indigenous-Led Growth

During the NIEDB meeting, CDC CEO Clarke Shecapio highlighted how institutional capacity underpins effective co-development.

The Cree Development Corporation (CDC) provides:

- Business counsel and project management
- Access to financing
- Strategic coordination across governments and partners

A key example of this institutional support is the feasibility study guided by a Memorandum of Understanding between Quebec and the Cree Nation, which includes:

- Mandatory hiring of Cree workers
- Engagement with Caribou Trappers
- Meaningful community involvement in project design

At the center of this work is the proposed railway under La Grande Alliance, currently moving toward a formal business case with potential construction targeted for 2030, contingent on Cree decision-making.

6. Lessons for Provincial Governments

The Cree Nation's experience offers important lessons for provinces seeking to build stronger relationships with Indigenous nations.

- Provincial governments can achieve better outcomes when Indigenous nations help define project objectives, governance structures, and decision-making processes from the beginning.
- Strong Indigenous organizations such as the Cree Development Corporation and the Cree Nation Government provide the governance capacity necessary for meaningful co-development. Funding institutions, rather than only individual projects, creates long-term value.
- Community engagement is most credible and effective when designed and delivered by Indigenous governments and organizations that understand local priorities, languages, and cultural contexts.
- Building trust requires flexibility. Provincial processes that allow for community-driven timelines are more likely to secure informed participation and durable outcomes.



- Effective co-development depends on sustained government-to-government relationships, not one-time engagement exercises. The success of La Grande Alliance reflects years of relationship-building between the Cree Nation and Quebec.

7. Lessons for Governments, Private Enterprise and Development Agencies

From the NIEDB's perspective, this case study offers several transferable lessons on Indigenous co-development for all levels of governments, development agencies and private enterprises. The Cree Nation's experience demonstrates that co-development is most effective when Indigenous communities define both the pace and purpose of development. The NIEDB was impressed not only by the outcomes of the LGA communications and engagement process, but by the discipline, patience, and leadership that shaped it.

The Cree Nation has shown that:

- Indigenous-led processes protect rights while enabling development
- Strong provincial-Indigenous relationships create conditions for successful co-development
- Community-driven engagement builds trust, legitimacy, and clarity
- Indigenous knowledge improves project design and risk management
- Long-term economic strategies are strongest when rooted in land, language, culture, and self-determination
- Investing in Indigenous institutions creates lasting capacity for future development initiatives

This approach stands as a compelling model for infrastructure assessment, economic planning, reconciliation-based development, and provincial-Indigenous partnership across Canada. The NIEDB encourages governments, provinces, and project proponents to learn from, and build upon, this example of effective co-development.

References

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