

THE CANADIAN NORTHERN CORRIDOR ROUNDTABLE PROGRAM: RESULTS AND LESSONS LEARNED

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Canadian Northern Corridor (CNC) Research Program is an investigation of the feasibility, desirability and acceptability of the corridor concept in advancing integrated, long-term infrastructure planning and development in Canada. The concept involves a series of multi-modal rights-of-way across mid- and northern Canada to provide space for efficient, timely and integrated development of infrastructure, including combinations of road, rail, transmission, pipeline, communications, port and airport infrastructure.

While there is no final CNC routing, the notional corridor reaches across Canada's mid- and northern regions, connecting all three coasts and creating interlinkages with the existing southern transportation corridors. These would be expected to make public and private infrastructure investments more attractive by reducing approval costs and uncertainties, sharing costs associated with establishing and administering rights-of-way, decreasing environmental footprints and, in general, moving to a more strategic, integrated and long-term approach to infrastructure planning and development. Overall, a CNC could potentially expand and diversify Canada's international and national trade opportunities, increase Canada's overall income and employment growth, support development and living standards for Indigenous, mid- and northern Canadian communities, and assist with Canada's northern security and sovereignty goals.

To analyze the feasibility, desirability and acceptability of a Canadian Northern Corridor, in addition to research studies spanning eight themes¹ and a Community Engagement Program, our research includes roundtable discussions with stakeholders from federal, provincial, territorial, municipal and Indigenous governments; industry (transportation, energy, telecommunications, tourism, natural resources and Indigenous funding and financing); and social and environmental NGOs. The Stakeholder Engagement Program conducted as part of the CNC Research Program addresses three key questions: 1) what key gaps in infrastructure and infrastructure policy persist according to potential rights- and stakeholders? 2) What are the potential impacts, challenges and opportunities of the CNC according to those rights- and stakeholders? 3) Which factors and conditions would make corridor development acceptable or unacceptable for a given rights- or stakeholder? This

¹ The Canadian Northern Corridor Research Program includes multiple studies across eight areas of expertise: Strategic and Trade Dimensions; Funding and Financing; Legal and Regulatory; Organization and Governance; Geography and Engineering; Economic Outcomes; Social Benefits and Costs; and Environmental Impacts.

report presents a thematic content analysis aggregating the qualitative data collected at seventeen virtual CNC roundtable engagement sessions, which took place from January 2022 until June 2022. All roundtable discussions were structured around four core themes: infrastructure needs and priorities across mid- and northern Canada; challenges, barriers and lessons learned from previous infrastructure development initiatives; expected benefits and governance considerations related to a CNC; and trade-offs and conditions for CNC development.

While discussing infrastructure needs and priorities, roundtable participants identified several areas of concern related to the following: a lack of adequate funding and financing options for infrastructure projects; equitable access to infrastructure, including transportation, energy, water and broadband; the mitigation of environmental concerns in current development; meaningful engagement and participation of Indigenous communities; a lack of infrastructure network resilience to mitigate impacts of climate change; overly complex and overlapping regulatory frameworks; identification of infrastructure priorities that align with economic growth strategies; and allocation of sufficient resources and capacity for the long-term maintenance and operation of existing and new infrastructure.

Digital connectivity was a common concern mentioned across all roundtables. Participants lamented that northern and remote communities lack reliable internet access, and, if available, download and upload speeds did not reach the same quality as in urban centres. Insufficient broadband access creates additional difficulties by preventing access to online services, including education and healthcare. In terms of barriers and lessons learned, roundtable participants highlighted that the current piecemeal approach to infrastructure is inefficient and has created shortcomings and bottlenecks. For example, the perspective that infrastructure development often caters to the needs of southern metropolitan areas while smaller communities in provinces and territories face lower priority on federal and provincial/territorial policy agendas is a common concern. This can result in disparities in infrastructure investments and development between urban and rural areas, leading to difficulties for smaller communities in accessing necessary infrastructure services and resources.

Participants also shared the perception that regulatory processes have become less streamlined over time and may overlap across different levels of government, creating additional administrative hurdles for project proponents. This can affect infrastructure development in smaller communities, leading to delays, and increased costs and uncertainties in the regulatory environment. Streamlining regulatory processes should be a key priority in infrastructure policy development to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of infrastructure project approvals, reduce red tape, and facilitate timely and cost-effective project implementation. This may involve efforts to simplify regulatory requirements, coordinate among different levels of government, harmonize regulations across jurisdictions, and enhance transparency and accountability in decision-making processes. However, achieving a balance between regulatory efficiency and environmental/social safeguards is a complex task that requires careful consideration of various perspectives and stakeholder interests, as well as compliance with relevant laws, regulations and best practices.

Roundtable participants recognized the current and potential future effects of climate change on global supply chains, which, according to scientific predictions, will lead to an increase in disruptions, with potentially hazardous outcomes for livelihoods. Improved community resilience, achieved through cooperation and capacity-building, helps mitigate the effects of climate change on the energy grid as well as on road- and rail connections. To achieve better outcomes from infrastructure strategies, participants wished for more cooperation between all rights- and stakeholders. Too often, initiatives and projects compete against each other for scarce resources due to budgetary constraints, with smaller communities sometimes failing to effectively advocate for their needs and the priorities essential for the well-being of their residents. Instead, we argue that the focus of governments must be shifted towards building local capacity and creating platforms that help foster exchange and innovation to collectively address shared infrastructure-related challenges.

Several benefits of developing a corridor were articulated by stakeholders. The CNC may offer a clear and comprehensive funding and governance framework, potentially spearheaded by the federal government but developed cooperatively with all rights- and stakeholders. A well-designed corridor-funding and governance framework could help streamline decision-making processes, facilitate coordination among different levels of government, stakeholders and communities and ensure that infrastructure investments are strategically aligned with regional needs and priorities. It could also provide a platform for collaborative planning and development of infrastructure projects that serve the interests of all parties involved.

The federal government can play a key role in providing leadership and support for the development of the corridor, but a collaborative approach that involves all relevant rights- and stakeholders is essential for its success. Through cooperative efforts and a comprehensive funding and governance framework, the corridor has the potential to support infrastructure development across mid- and northern Canada in a way that is inclusive, sustainable and aligned with regional needs and priorities.

In addition to potential benefits, participants identified specific trade-offs and conditions that are fundamental for the success of a CNC. One condition for corridor development is the integration of local expertise; participants described experiences in which southern-based solutions sometimes do not apply to northern conditions and circumstances. Another important drawback of any kind of development is the impact on the environment. A CNC was considered a mega-project, which could potentially have cascading effects on northern environments, including the boreal forest, permafrost and wildlife. Mitigating and identifying key risks to the environment via impact assessments, environmental monitoring and community engagement programs are key conditions. In addition to environmental concerns, participants frequently noted the social circumstances in smaller communities and how they may benefit from a corridor, alongside potential negative impacts of increased connectivity, such as the flow of illegal substances. Infrastructure such as housing, healthcare and education were considered key priorities in mid- and northern Canadian communities, and potential corridor infrastructure must make provisions for such soft infrastructure.

We find that a large-scale corridor concept is challenging to conceive, in both theory and practice, for mid- and northern Canada. We recommend a segmented corridor approach by focusing on those development initiatives that are already gaining public acceptance, and that communities have identified as key priorities, such as digital infrastructure. One early priority could be the digitization of highways and roadways to enhance safety while travelling and digitally connect communities. As such, a corridor approach must reflect a holistic strategy addressing the existing challenges related to the infrastructure gap in mid- and northern Canada which contributes to problems around unreliable transportation pathways, digital connectivity, food insecurity, inadequate housing and lack of healthcare and education.