

# IMPLICATIONS OF A NORTHERN CORRIDOR ON SOFT INFRASTRUCTURE IN THE NORTH AND NEAR NORTH

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Disparities in health care, education and employment, housing and social welfare have long been documented in Northern Canada. These disparities have been linked to colonialism, ineffective social policy, uneven development and the high costs of service delivery and infrastructure in northern regions. This literature review aims to present a comprehensive understanding of existing research on the current state of soft infrastructure and its deficits in Canada's North and near-North regions. This scoping review contributes to a larger project led by the University of Calgary's School of Public Policy and their Northern Corridor Research Program, a project which aims to evaluate the establishment of permissible corridors in Canada. These corridors provide defined multi-modal rights-of-way with accompanying regulatory and governance structures. Specifically, the term "soft infrastructure," for the purposes of this review, refers to health care, housing, education, employment, jobs training and emergency services. The implications of these deficits in terms of economic and social opportunities in northern regions are discussed in relation to current research. Additionally, the ways in which these deficits relate to current hard infrastructure assets and deficits are assessed based on the reviewed literature. Finally, the costs, benefits and opportunities associated with the proposed Canadian corridor with regards to soft infrastructure deficits and needs are addressed.

Soft infrastructure in the North and near North is found generally to be lacking, and the literature highlights several deficits and needs that have been prioritized by northern and Indigenous communities and regional governments alike. Furthermore, the various types of soft infrastructure highlighted in this report—health care, housing, education, employment and emergency services—intersect in significant ways, and therefore a comprehensive, systems view must be taken on deficits and their impact to individual and community well-being. During the course of our analysis, health-care deficits quickly emerged as an overarching frame for deficits in other areas of soft infrastructure. Housing deficits also contributed significantly to needs in other areas. The significant and pervasive impact of deficits in health care and housing has been further emphasized during the COVID-19 pandemic, where the impacts on northern public health of lack of adequate health care and the persistent housing crisis were particular concerns amongst northern communities and leadership. These impacts included not only the potential for widespread transmission of COVID-19 in the face of an outbreak, but also challenges for physical distancing and self-isolation, the potential severity of the virus given pre-existing health conditions experienced

in northern communities, the capacity of the northern health care system to cope with a high number of severe cases and the ability to test and monitor case numbers.

The state of soft infrastructure deficits across the North and near North clearly illustrates the interconnections between health care, housing, education, emergency services and employment. These areas of soft infrastructure cannot be addressed through a siloed approach, but rather one that recognizes the ways in which these areas are linked in the lives of individual northerners as well as families, communities and regions as a whole. Moreover, much of the soft infrastructure detailed in this report illuminates a stubborn commitment to “one size fits all” solutions as a means to boost the efficiency, affordability and ultimately the ease of administration of these various infrastructure types. Altogether, however, the result is systems, programming and policy ill-suited to the context and diverse cultures of the North and near North, leading to a significant disconnect between local needs, priorities and realities and the type of soft infrastructure that has been established. There is thus a critical need for soft infrastructure deficits to be addressed in a way that facilitates and supports self-determination and northern leadership, all the while being responsive to the contextual and environmental realities of northern regions.

Sparse settlement patterns, a lack of permanent roads and reliance on air transport exacerbate the costs of soft infrastructure delivery, causing and further contributing to soft infrastructure deficits, and have also severely limited the possibilities for responding innovatively to community-identified soft infrastructural needs. Today, Northern Canada is undergoing yet another period of significant and rapid change. Along with the significant political, economic and social impacts of climate change, the way of life of many northern peoples is being threatened. There is significant potential for the development of hard infrastructure in the North to positively support the resilience of northern peoples and communities in the face of such change.

All told, a number of themes emerge when considering the potential impacts of northern corridor development on critical areas of soft infrastructure in the North and near North: accessibility and connection, affordability, recruitment and retention, and Indigenous self-determination and northern autonomy. With appropriate policy intervention, such areas would be bolstered through improved hard infrastructure via northern corridor development. In order to ensure the alignment of hard infrastructure with soft infrastructure deficits and priorities, strong and integrated policy responses across all levels of governments—community, Indigenous, territorial/provincial and federal—are required. To support maximum benefits for northerners, a series of recommendations are advanced: firstly, consultation of northern community members and leaders and their meaningful and sustained engagement across all stages of northern corridor development is critical if such a project is to benefit northern peoples, communities and regions. Secondly, the recognition of Indigenous rights, and the settlement of outstanding land claims and self-government agreements, are crucial to ensuring Indigenous peoples can maximize benefits to their communities. Support for the settlement of claims is crucial. Thirdly, policies prioritizing that northern and Indigenous businesses benefit from hard infrastructural development are necessary to limit leakage of economic benefits from northern communities. Fourthly, accessible education and training of northerners is necessary to ensure they can benefit from employment opportunities created through hard infrastructure expansion. Fifthly, a northern corridor would undoubtedly lead to increased

exploration and resource development, due to an abundance of non-renewable resources of all types across the North and near North. Strong policy around extractive industry, to ensure the distribution of mining revenues and benefits, is key to ensuring relative economic well-being and to avoid potential political conflicts between individual communities and the governments and organizations that represent them. Finally, there is significant potential for a northern corridor to encourage further centralization or urbanization in the North and near North. Appropriate policy development and community planning will be required in order to plan accordingly and provide the necessary supports and resources for northerners relocating to regional centres and/or to support smaller communities in ensuring an equitable distribution of services, supports and opportunities.

In sum, this scoping literature review revealed a number of critical deficits in northern health care, education and employment and housing. A comprehensive understanding of these deficits in soft infrastructure in Northern Canada directly informs our discussion of the potential opportunities that a northern corridor could bring to northerners, their communities and the region as a whole. Accessibility and connection, affordability, recruitment and retention, and Indigenous self-determination and northern autonomy are all areas in need of support and expansion across the landscape of soft infrastructure in the North and near North. In order to ensure the maximized, sustainable and equitable benefit of northerners, however, robust, comprehensive and integrated policy intervention is required across community, Indigenous, regional and federal governments.