

## **Northern Policy Institute and Catalytic Governance**

Written Submission for Pre-Budget Consultations

August 7, 2020

**Recommendation:** That the government provide funding for self-governing regions to create and implement strategies to deliver online services including health care, education, and other public and private services to all citizens, especially remote, rural, and vulnerable populations.

That the government begin this work by undertaking ten pilot projects across Canada -- leveraging existing communities of action and multi-stakeholder engagements -- to develop a roadmap that can be used for other regions across Canada.

## INTRODUCTION

The ongoing COVID pandemic has laid bare many shortcomings in our national systems. Cracks in our social safety net; too little investment in long-term care and early childhood education; the inherent health risks of continuing to focus our growth in ever larger urban centres; and, the inability of large portions of our population to participate effectively in the global online society. We emphasize the word society. By paying attention to the underlying relationships, the digital ecosystem can be used for far more than the delivery of government services or the pursuit of economic opportunity. Critically, digital tools, and their supporting infrastructure, can build relationships between people and communities that currently do not exist. Breaking down the chronic isolation of remote communities and their residents and providing an effective basis to link them to the rest of the world.

There is no roadmap to creating a digital society. We suggest that the government adopt a test and learn approach to discovering effective methodologies. By funding a few small projects across the country, Canada might discover ways to build digital societies that deliver services, including health care, education and other public and private services to all citizens, especially remote, rural and vulnerable populations ensuring that no one is left behind.

### **An Inclusive Approach**

Declaring the Internet an essential service and making reliable, affordable access available to all Canadians is only the first step. Many citizens will not be able to utilize these services, nor will they be designed and delivered in ways that suit their circumstances. Residents of a region must come together to build sustainable digital societies for themselves.

To date, much of the growth in the digital economy in Canada has been in super cities (Toronto, Vancouver and Montreal). Whether or not it is possible for non-large urban centres to participate has yet to be proven, but hypothetically the information age is far less dependent on time and place. Using technology – internet access, especially mobile internet, apps (downloadable software), cloud storage and computing services, etc. – we can access information any place, any time making it possible to supply goods and services efficiently to and from remote regions.

The downside of supplying goods and services electronically is isolation. To offset this, residents must create the communities they want to live in, where they want to live. They can define “happiness” in terms of physical well-being, intellectual pursuits, emotional belonging and economic independence to suit themselves. Health care (wellness), education, cultural belonging (including language) and economic development can be tailored to the community and the individuals in it. The people in the community must be responsible for the development and implementation of these services in their community.

A project as complex as this needs an inclusive process that engages a wide range of participants in constructive dialogue, creates shared mental maps of the future digital ecosystem and most importantly, drives communities of practice to action. Leadership and governance in the information age are about making meaning – the process of making sense of what people are doing together so that people feel committed to the project. The creation of an inclusive governance model that empowers leaders to better engage

communities of interest, find common ground and build the trust required to take on wicked challenges, is required to build truly digital societies for Canadians.

### **For Example, Creating a Digital Society in Northwestern Ontario**

For the past two years, three organizations, Thunder Bay Community Economic Development Corporation, The Northern Policy Institute and Catalytic Governance have worked together with key stakeholders in Northwestern Ontario (NWO) to develop and promote a project to create a Digital Ecosystem for NWO. This ecosystem would deliver public and private sector goods and services to communities in the region, including the City of Thunder Bay, 34 towns and municipalities and 81 First Nations. It would also enhance NWO's digital connections to the rest of Canada and the world, making it possible for the region to market its products and services globally.

Over the past 40 years, the region has lost most of its resource-based jobs and the middle-class standard of living it provided them. Indigenous communities, which were largely self-sufficient, have become dependent on government programs. The future prosperity of the region depends upon the ability of its residents to create a digital society for the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

The project, while supporting and monitoring the closure of the physical infrastructure gaps between communities will focus on increasing the capacity of individual northerners, northern communities, and northern businesses to fully participate in a modern online society. This means system changes – in education, training, health care, and governance. It means developing new skills and habits and a greater comfort with the online world. It means addressing the issues of privacy, security and reliability in a way that brings northern and rural communities not up to the standards enjoyed in Canada's big cities but to a level where these rural communities and their residents are the bar by which others are measured.

This project at its heart, is the application of Catalytic Governance ([insert link](#)) to assist the people of Northwestern Ontario to create a new society. A digital society, that meets their needs, as defined by them, and builds the societal frameworks and decision-making infrastructure necessary to sustain that society long into the future.

### **Funding for Natural Regions to Experiment**

The creation of an online society is not a one size fits all exercise. Each region in Canada is different – its circumstances are unique. For the Canadian economy and society to advance the well-being of all citizens, each region will need to experiment using an inclusive governance process to create a digital society. We estimate the initial cost of using the Catalytic Governance process to create a digital society for Northwestern Ontario at \$1.5 million. We recommend that the government provide a pool of funding of \$10 to \$15 million to support ten regional pilot initiatives across Canada to work collaboratively to create and build digital societies that meet the needs of their residents.