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## Executive Summary

### Mishkeegogamang and Webequie Assessment Reports

The litany of social and economic ills faced by the small, remote First Nations communities of Mishkeegogamang and Webequie is not new, or sudden. Both communities, which have existed within their traditional lands in northwestern Ontario for countless generations, have faced cataclysmic changes and challenges since the turn of the last century. Despite extreme hardship, residents continue to have hope and create efforts to improve their lives.

Mishkeegogamang First Nation and Webequie First Nation are two of 49 First Nations united under the Nishnawbe Aski Nation political organization of northwestern Ontario. Mishkeegogamang is located on Hwy. 599 on the shores of Lake St. Joseph, about 250 km northeast of Sioux Lookout. It includes at least 10 settlements with a total population of 1,516. A high proportion of the population is under the age of 20, and relatively few are over the age of 45.

Webequie is found on Eastwood Island on Winisk Lake, part of the river system that flows into Hudson Bay. It is 540 km north of Thunder Bay and is accessible only by air or by a seasonal winter road. While most of the 690 residents speak English, the native tongue is Oji-Cree.

#### The Partnership

The perseverance of these two communities has led to a unique partnership: the North-South Partnership for Children, Mamow Sha-way-gi-kay-win. The Partnership is unique because it is made up of a growing group of caring individuals and organizations based in both northern and southern Ontario, including local and international non-government organizations, foundations, academia and others with a rich and varied roster of skills and experiences. The Partnership is dedicated to learning from, and supporting the dreams and efforts of First Nations Chiefs, Elders, youth and community members.

#### Evaluation of the Life of a Community

It is hard to think of Canada as a place where the term “humanitarian emergency” would be appropriate. Yet many of the disturbing conditions experienced in developing countries such as lack of access to clean water, housing and education are present in remote First Nations communities, including Mishkeegogamang and Webequie.

The Partnership adapted a community assessment model used in the international arena and worked with First Nations communities to develop a response plan. Our goal was to provide a snapshot of the issues, strengths, challenges and history known by two individual communities, but framed in a new perspective, making use of limited but efficient methods and resources. Nine outside experts were paired with community representatives/experts in the following areas:

- Livelihoods (including economic development)
- Infrastructure (food/water/sanitation/housing)
- Community participation (including culture and traditions)
- Education/recreation
- Children and parents (including safety and security)
- Physical and mental health

The response plan would take into account not only key issues as identified by the community, but would also outline existing or potential opportunities available and provide a list of recommendations for action geared to both short- and long-term goals.

## **Overarching Findings**

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- **Solutions lie within both communities and members must regain control of their communities and shape their future**  
Residents already have the solutions to many of the issues detailed below they need partners who possess supports and resources. Residents *do not* want more prescriptive solutions or solutions assigned by outsiders..
- **Legacy of past has devastating effects on present generations**  
The negative, complex and enduring impact of colonization continues to overshadow any positive developments in both communities. The removal of earlier generations to government-run residential schools has also created a legacy of pain, loss of culture, language and parenting skills as well as causing a generational cycle of substance abuse, violence and suicide that is difficult to stop.
- **Sharing information and experiences between different First Nations (i.e., success with a language-based program) and improving communications and relationships within each community are key for healing, coping and growth.**
- **Training and capacity building for existing workers, including dialogue with people outside the community for problem solving and “thinking outside the box.”**  
Human resource leadership training support for various areas including Chief & Council, mental health workers, women’s circle, education workers, youth council, capacity building in micro finance, economic development co-ordinator and others.
- **Advocacy planning, including strategies for establishing relationships with voluntary and government agencies, corporate sector and international non-government aid agencies will help increase funding and secure other needed resources.**

## **Key Findings and Recommendations**

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### **1. Dismal prospects for livelihoods: despite rich resources and strong desire to work**

A lack of employment opportunities, low incomes and two of the highest costs of living in all of Ontario all contribute to a resulting rate of poverty that would be unacceptable in any southern urban community. In both communities, employment is limited to the Northern Store, community and social services and seasonal employment.

#### **Recommendations**

- Explore opportunities to create or partner with other First Nations to form a co-op grocery store or alternative to the Northern Store.
- Explore opportunities for training in mining/construction.
- Investigate opportunities for tourism; selling community crafts; options for community farming.

## **2. Infrastructure lacking: even the basics for survival—food, water, sanitation, housing**

Over 50% of children in communities like Mishkeegogamang and Webequie go hungry at times. Both communities have a desperate need for housing. Up to 20 people live in two or three bedroom home and most houses have either moderate or severe mould.

### **Recommendations:**

- Secure financial and human resources to construct 100 new housing units (Mishkeegogamang) and 40 new houses (Webequie) and renovate existing homes; explore feasibility of building quality log houses.
- Build independent living houses to accommodate the high number of children in government care: children currently unable to live in Mishkeegogamang; build land-based treatment/healing centre (Webequie).
- Construct housing for Elders.

## **3. Education: children lag three to four grades behind in school; land-based programs show encouraging results**

Both communities have difficulty identifying and treating special needs children, of which there are many. In Mishkeegogamang the school is a showcase for the community's pride and leadership but it ends at Grade 8 so older students must leave the community, often boarding with strangers hundreds of kilometres away. Land-based school and recreation programs and teaching of local language and culture are seen as vital to children's healthy development. Youth in both communities push for technical and trade courses, which are not offered. In Webequie, bullying is an ongoing issue.

### **Recommendations:**

- Implement suicide awareness outreach in schools to make it acceptable to talk about this almost taboo subject
- Expand the curriculum up to Grade 10, and eventually Grades 11 and 12 (Mishkeegogamang); expand curriculum to Grade 12 (Webequie); invest in local language retention programs.
- Immediately address special education needs.

## **4. Recreation: reclaiming cultural activities fosters hope for the future; people dedicated to leading change**

Recreational space for youth is an issue in both communities, especially in winter months when there is nowhere warm to "hang out." Activity programs for children and youth are needed, including those which connect youth to Elders. People are willing and capable of organizing activities; however, it is often the lack of space, equipment and costs that defeat their plans. There is also underlying tension in both communities between those who practise traditional spirituality and those who practise Christianity.

### **Recommendations:**

- Implement child and youth programs, including sports and recreation, arts, and especially land-based activities to reunite the younger generation with their cultural heritage.
- Build and support Youth Councils so they may have their voice heard in the community.
- Explore opportunities for Nation to Nation mentoring, so that successful program models can be replicated.

## **5. Children's safety and security: at risk parents continue to be overwhelmed by trauma**

Parents are overburdened dealing with issues such as community and family trauma, coping with extreme poverty and personal issues. This affects their ability to guide, direct and set boundaries for their children. Youth highlighted the critical role that parents and Elders play in their lives; however, language remains an ongoing barrier to relationships. Due to recent suicides, parents fear disciplining their children. They are worried they will lose them or push the children to hurt themselves.

### **Recommendations:**

- Develop a co-ordinated team of community resource workers and programs that would provide support for each other, break isolation of workers, and create joint solutions for inter-related issues.
- Teach basic life skills, with programs geared to young adults who are becoming parents at an early age.
- Develop/extend early years programs for parents geared to supporting children 0-6.

## **6. Mental and physical health: suicides, crises, losses and substance abuse overwhelm communities**

Mental health issues are exacerbated by poor housing and economic conditions and a lack of extracurricular activities for youth in particular. Alcoholism is a major concern and is cross-generational. Concentrated treatment is only available off-reserve, is difficult to get into and there is no follow-up treatment upon return. Both communities experience an unresolved sense of grief. Residents also experience a deep sense of loss when children leave the community either for school or to go to a foster home. Families who are separated often find it difficult to rebuild broken bonds.

There are many other health concerns, including high rates of diabetes, poor nutrition, respiratory illnesses, and although not diagnosed, high estimated numbers of children with Fetal Alcohol Syndrome.

### **Recommendations:**

- Develop a land-based family treatment program that has the healing components derived from traditional ways.
- Develop a "Break the Silence" open dialogue within the community about suicide and sexual abuse; develop a comprehensive alcohol and drug education program.
- Provide debriefing and emotional support for counsellors, resource workers and community leaders.