

Coordinating action across government



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Background

Coordinating the activities of many organizations is not easy. It requires flexible models of governance to work toward common goals. It also requires the skill to draw together senior managers with different perspectives and priorities.

In 1997, the Government asked the Department of Intergovernmental and Aboriginal Affairs to coordinate the implementation of the Government's policies regarding Métis people and First Nations people who live away from reserves.

By 1999, the Government's policies had evolved into a discussion paper about principles and goals for increasing the participation of Métis and off-reserve First Nations people in society. The Government used the discussion paper to seek comments from Aboriginal people, leaders in education, and seven Saskatchewan communities. Following those discussions, in January 2001, the Government announced its current policy—*A Framework for Cooperation: Practical Approaches to Issues Affecting Métis and Off-Reserve First Nations People in Saskatchewan* (the Framework). This policy responds to the 1996 report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples. The Framework is publicly available on the Department's website at <http://www.iaa.gov.sk.ca/aboriginal>.

The Government initially asked the Department to coordinate the implementation of the Framework among six departments. The Framework now requires action by 15 departments.¹ Crown corporations such as SaskTel and the Saskatchewan Liquor and Gaming Authority do not yet participate directly.

The Framework sets out four goals (see Exhibit 1). The goals aim to improve the long-term future of Métis and off-reserve First Nations people and increase their participation in the Saskatchewan economy. Métis and

¹ The Framework involves thirteen departments with service delivery responsibilities: Education; Post - Secondary Education and Skills Training; Economic and Co-operative Development; Labour; Environment and Resource Management, Social Services; Health; Justice; Municipal Affairs and Housing; Culture, Youth and Recreation; the Office of Northern Affairs; Intergovernmental and Aboriginal Affairs; and the Public Service Commission. In addition, central agencies help to facilitate the *Framework* including the Department of Executive Council (particularly Cabinet Planning Unit) and the Department of Finance (particularly Treasury Board Branch and the Accountability Project within the Performance Management Branch).

First Nations people form a rapidly growing part of Saskatchewan society. By 2020, Statistics Canada predicts that Aboriginal people will make up a large proportion of the work force in Saskatchewan.²

Exhibit 1

Goals set out in <i>A Framework for Cooperation</i>
<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Enhance the successful entrance and completion of primary, secondary, and post-secondary education for Métis and off-reserve First Nations people.2. Prepare Métis and off-reserve First Nations people to participate in a representative provincial workforce.3. Ensure representative workforce participation by Métis and off-reserve First Nations people in the provincial economy.4. Improve the individual and community well being of Métis and off-reserve First Nations people.

The Department's role, as the lead or coordinating department, is to share information and understanding about the Framework across the Government. The Department must also gain the cooperation of participating departments to take action on this policy. Successful coordination is critical to implement the Framework and to achieve its goals.

Audit objective and criteria

The objective of this audit is to examine whether the Department has adequate processes to coordinate action by key Government departments on the goals set out in *A Framework for Cooperation: Practical Approaches to Issues Affecting Métis and Off-Reserve First Nations People in Saskatchewan*. The audit focuses on processes that the Department used from October 1999 to July 2001.

During all phases of this audit, we followed *The Standards for Assurance Engagements* of The Canadian Institute of Chartered Accountants (CICA). The CICA established these standards to guide the work of auditors.

² Based on Statistics Canada, 1996 Census: Dimensions Series. *Portrait of the Aboriginal Population in Canada*

After discussion with the Department, we used international literature and the reports of other auditors to develop criteria (see Exhibit 2). The Department agreed with these criteria.

We assessed the Department's coordination processes against these criteria. We examined policies, plans, minutes, reports, and other tools for communication. In addition, we interviewed selected key officials in the coordinating Department and in three participating departments. We also examined how the Department uses interdepartmental forums to coordinate action.

Exhibit 2 - Criteria

To coordinate action by key Government departments on the goals set out in *A Framework for Cooperation*, the Department should have processes to:

1. Establish accountability for action on common goals

- Establish coordination structures
- Establish accountability tools
- Obtain commitment for action on goals

2. Provide leadership for action on goals

- Communicate expectations, risks, and opportunities
- Encourage realistic balance of expectations with resources

3. Make visible the extent of progress

- Monitor performance regularly
- Follow-up on commitments to action
- Report performance

Audit conclusion and recommendation

We found that the Department had adequate processes, from October 1999 to July 2001, to coordinate action by key Government departments on the goals set out in *A Framework for Cooperation*, except for the following processes.

First, the Department needs to develop better processes to ensure that key participating departments appropriately align their plans with the goals and objectives of the Framework in a way that balances expectations with available resources. To develop these processes, the

Department needs to continue its work with the Government's central agencies (e.g., Departments of Finance and Executive Council). We made related recommendations for improved government planning processes in previous reports (i.e., Chapter 1A of our 2000 Fall Report – Volume 3 and Chapter 1A of our 2001 Spring Report).

Second, the Department needs better processes to ensure that it receives regular written reports from key participating departments about the actions they take or plan to take, and the barriers to these actions.

With written reports from the participating departments, the Department would be better able to monitor what is done, what is not done, and what requires more follow-up action or coordination. Written reports also would assist Cabinet to more effectively monitor action on the Framework and provide Cabinet with better information to allocate resources.

- 1. We recommend that the Department of Intergovernmental and Aboriginal Affairs establish processes to obtain regular written reports from the participating departments on actions they take toward achieving the goals set out in *A Framework for Cooperation*.**

Because *A Framework for Cooperation* is a relatively new Government strategy, the Department has not yet fully developed its processes to report on the results of the Framework. At this time, we are unable to assess if the Department has adequate processes to make visible the extent of the Government's progress towards achieving the goals of the Framework.

We encourage the Department to continue its efforts to report both actions and results to the Cabinet and in turn to the public. We made related recommendations for improved government processes to report performance (i.e., actions and results) in previous reports (i.e., Chapter 1A of our 2000 Fall Report – Volume 3 and Chapter 1A of our 2001 Spring Report).

Key findings by criteria

For each main criterion (see Exhibit 2), we summarize (in italics) our expectations of the Department in its role as the lead coordinating partner. We then describe our key findings for each criterion.

Establish accountability for action on common goals

We expected that as the lead coordinating partner, the Department would:

- ◆ *use coordination structures such as a steering committee and obtain a clear mandate as the coordinating department;*
- ◆ *establish accountability tools to guide its partner departments to act on common goals (i.e., establish clear roles for participating departments, dates for the achievement of specific targets, and a system to report progress on actions and results); and*
- ◆ *work with senior officials and legislators to get commitment for the necessary action to achieve the Government's goals (e.g., seek approval for plans and resources).*

Establish structures to coordinate action

On July 28, 1997, Cabinet gave the Department a mandate as the lead coordinator, and asked the Department to assess the impact of current programs toward improving the situation of Métis and off-reserve First Nations people. Cabinet routinely reconfirmed the mandate of the Department as the lead coordinator from 1997 to 2001.

Cabinet asked the Department to work with other departments to make proposals for action. The Department told other departments about its mandate as lead department when it invited them to become participants. In 2000 and 2001, written invitations explained the nature of the Government strategy and the role of the lead department to coordinate action.

In 1997, at Cabinet's request, the Department established an Interdepartmental Committee as a key structure to coordinate action. Membership grew from the original six departments to thirteen participating departments and agencies. The Committee met almost

monthly from 1999 to 2001. The Committee focuses on sharing information and planning.

In addition to the 13 participating departments, two central agencies (i.e., the Departments of Finance and Executive Council) attend meetings of the Interdepartmental Committee. As the lead coordinator, the Department works closely with these central agency representatives to help departments to plan and obtain resources for action toward the goals of the Framework.

Establish accountability tools

For each goal in the Framework (see Exhibit 1), Cabinet established clear objectives, targets with dates and priority actions.³ This is an important accountability tool.

Participating departments told us the targets will be difficult to achieve and achieving them will require more resources. The Department recognizes that challenges exist in using the targets to establish accountability for action. The Department acknowledges that unrealistic targets (or targets perceived as unrealistic) can discourage action, rather than encourage it. At the same time, it notes that challenging targets help convey the importance, and perhaps the urgency, of action to achieve the targets and the goals of the Framework.

In addition, the Department coordinates the development of action plans for the Framework with the assistance of participating departments. The Interdepartmental Committee discusses and agrees on an action plan for the next year for the Framework. These action plans are a second important accountability tool.

As the lead coordinator, the Department also needed to establish an accountability system of regular reporting from participating departments about their activities and results. From 1999 to 2001, the Department routinely requested participating departments to make verbal reports on their activities during meetings of the Interdepartmental Committee. The Department did not specify the expected content of the reports. Verbal

³ The Department, on behalf of the Interdepartmental Committee, continues to discuss these objectives and priorities with the community and various stakeholders. The Department told us it plans to make the targets public for discussion in 2002.

reports are less effective than brief written reports accompanied by verbal explanations.

Obtain commitment for action on goals

As a part of obtaining commitment for action on goals, the Department appropriately respected the accountability relationships of the participating departments. For example, the staff is accountable to the deputy, the deputy to the minister, and the minister to Cabinet. The Department respected the role of Cabinet and its subcommittees to give direction to participating departments. The Department recognized that this respect was essential to gain the commitment of participating departments.

As the lead coordinator, the Department used several methods to gain the commitment of all partners to take action toward achieving the goals of the Government's strategy. It kept the members of the Interdepartmental Committee and other key government officials informed by sharing documents, calling meetings, and distributing Committee meeting minutes. It also assisted discussion in meetings of the Committee. During these meetings, participants talked openly about barriers to action and the nature of support required for success. They shared ideas and drew attention to opportunities.

To gain the support of deputy ministers and ministers across participating departments, the Department provided members of the Interdepartmental Committee and deputy ministers with various opportunities to provide input into information submitted to Cabinet about the Framework. For example, it provided them with drafts of the written reports and formally invited their comments until a consensus was reached on the report's content. When the reports required a decision of Cabinet, the ministers of all participating departments jointly signed them. The Department also encouraged the deputy ministers and ministers of these departments to attend and actively participate in meetings of Cabinet's subcommittees.

Participation in this process gave deputy ministers several opportunities to influence decisions, to understand the rationale for a course of action, and to assess the consequences of inaction. This participation should increase the commitment of these senior officials to act on the goals of the Framework.

A key to gaining commitment is the process to gain resources for joint action. The Department expected the participating departments to plan and budget for actions toward achieving the goals of the Framework in their individual plans and budgets. As the lead coordinator, the Department needed a way to help departments assess whether their approved plans would achieve the desired results within the timeframes and resources set by Cabinet. The Department is currently working with the Interdepartmental Committee to further develop processes that help departments align their plans and resources with Cabinet priorities.

As reported elsewhere by our Office, the Government's planning processes are evolving.⁴ The Government's planning guidelines encourage departments to set priorities, and to improve the links between their strategic plans and their financial plans (i.e., resources). The Department undertook this coordination at a time when the planning processes used by departments were changing. This made the task of coordination more complex.

Provide leadership for action on goals

It is challenging to provide leadership for action on multiple priorities and across many government departments. The Department faces this challenge as it coordinates action on the four goals of the Framework for Cooperation (see Exhibit 1). We expected communication would be essential for the Department to provide leadership. Participating departments need to know what is expected, what risks they must manage, and which opportunities to grasp. We anticipated that the Department would lead by promoting consensus on priorities for action. We anticipated that the Department would find ways to encourage a balance of expectations with available resources.

Communicate expectations, risks, and opportunities

As the lead coordinator, the Department ensured participating departments knew their responsibilities. Each year, it worked with the Interdepartmental Committee to agree on an action plan for the activities of participating departments. Then, the Department asked the deputy ministers and ministers of the participating departments to approve the annual action plan. Finally, the Department requested that Cabinet

⁴ Chapter 1A – Key Processes to Plan, 2001 Spring Report

approve the annual action plan. This process left little doubt about what the Government expected of the participating departments.

In addition, through the Interdepartmental Committee, the Department shared information about the changing environment and situations of risk or opportunity affecting the Framework. Participating departments could then consider how best to use this information.

With continued increases in the number of participating departments and the large number of departments involved, one of the leadership challenges that the Department faced was the changing membership of the Interdepartmental Committee. The Department oriented new committee members to ensure they understood the purpose, goals, and priorities of the Framework. The orientation included key documents and discussions to give new members a clear understanding of the importance of action by participating departments.

Encourage realistic balance of expectations with resources

A common way to balance expectations and resources is to agree on priorities. The Department primarily used two ways to promote consensus on priorities—community consultation and processes to set priorities within departments.

In 1999, the Department facilitated consultation by participating deputy ministers with Aboriginal leaders and key education groups. For example, as part of this process, the Department consulted the Federation of Saskatchewan Indian Nations and the Tribal Council chiefs, the Métis Nation-Saskatchewan and the Provincial Métis Council, Saskatchewan School Trustees and the Saskatchewan Teachers Federation, and provincial post-secondary education leaders. The Department used these consultations, along with the priorities raised in seven community meetings held throughout Saskatchewan, to identify the priorities for the Framework.

The Department worked with the members of the Interdepartmental Committee to gain consensus that these community priorities were consistent with priorities for action in the Framework. The Department reconfirmed these priorities with Cabinet. Agreement on priorities is an important step toward balancing resources and planned targets.

The Department also proposed a rating system to help set priorities within the participating departments. In the 2000-01 planning cycle, three participating departments used this rating system to set priorities. The Department also worked directly with the central agencies to help promote a balance between resources and expectations.

The two processes used by the Department to promote priority setting were not sufficient. Neither the members of the Interdepartmental Committee nor the participating deputy ministers could fully align the objectives and planned targets of the Framework with departments' other priorities within the resources available.

We note that for the 2002-2003 Budget, the Government has announced that it will use a new approach to budgeting for important strategies, like the Framework, that involves many departments. This budget process will require lead departments to coordinate an action plan that will achieve the Government's objectives within the resources available. The action plan must include specific activities (and costs) that will contribute directly to the achievement of Government objectives like those in the Framework.

The Department anticipates that this new budgetary process, along with its processes for setting priorities, will help to overcome some of the challenges faced by important government-wide strategies.

Make visible the extent of progress

We expected that as the lead coordinator, the Department would monitor the actions of participating departments, evaluate progress, and report it to Cabinet. We anticipated that the Department would follow-up to confirm that participating departments carried out the planned actions. In this way, the Department could identify barriers to action and focus attention to resolve the barriers. We expected it would be essential for the Department to report to Cabinet, and later to the public, on the extent of progress by all participating departments on key performance targets.

Monitor performance regularly

The Department needs to improve its ability to monitor whether participating departments took action as planned. The Department also

needs to monitor whether the expected results of the Framework are being achieved.

From 1997 to 2001, the Department monitored departmental actions primarily through verbal reports on activities from participating departments during meetings of the Interdepartmental Committee. Verbal reports are not efficient for large groups. Also, only 10 departments reported during 2000-2001. Some key departments did not report on their actions.

Monitoring results also can be challenging. In February 2001, Cabinet confirmed its planned targets for the Framework subject to further community consultation. The Department tried to use these targets to monitor results based on progress toward priority objectives. It found that it could not easily get timely and reliable information at a reasonable cost. The Department noted that some participating departments collect the required information, while others do not. It also noted that the availability of some information depended upon Statistics Canada. Statistics Canada updates some information only at intervals (e.g., 5 year cycle of Canadian Census data). The Department has also identified that current statistics may not be complete or accurate because they rely on individuals to self-declare their Aboriginal status. Ad hoc research might be the only way to collect some information at a reasonable cost.

We encourage the Department to pursue reasonably low-cost ways of assessing progress toward the performance targets of the Framework.

Follow-up on commitments to action

As the lead department, the Department is responsible to coordinate further action when progress is insufficient, or when the action taken is not effective. From 1999 to 2001, the Department relied primarily on discussions with the members of the Interdepartmental Committee and on communications with the deputy ministers and ministers of the participating departments.

During 2001, the Department developed a process to help evaluate action plans for the Framework, and later, to monitor performance. The Interdepartmental Committee worked together to further develop this process. At the time of our audit, this process had not yet been used.

This evaluation process expects each department to independently rate the effectiveness of each planned action. The Committee will then discuss the rated effectiveness of actions until it reaches a consensus that each planned action will be useful to achieve the objectives of the Framework.

The Department also expects the evaluation process to identify whether there are gaps in each year's action plan. That is, the evaluation process will show which objectives do not have an action plan that all agree will be effective. Once this evaluation process begins to work, the Department expects that it will be able to follow-up on areas that require more coordinated action to meet the goals of the Framework.

Report performance

The Department tried to report performance toward achieving the Framework to Cabinet and its subcommittee in 2000. The 2000 report highlighted progress toward achieving some objectives and included related demographic information.

The report did not contain the goals or objectives of the Framework or compare actual results to planned targets. The Department is currently developing processes to report to the public about progress toward achieving the goals of the Framework.

Summary

The Department takes seriously its role as the lead department for the Framework. As yet, not all processes are working effectively to help the Department coordinate action across the many participating departments. To date, the Department has built a sound foundation to coordinate action by key participating departments on the goals set out in *A Framework for Cooperation: Practical Approaches to Issues Affecting Métis and Off-Reserve First Nations People in Saskatchewan*. The Department told us that it will continue to make public consultation a priority.

We look forward to monitoring the future development of this important Government strategy.

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