

Evaluation of the First Nations Solid Waste Management Initiative: Summary Report

Background

In Budget 2016, the federal government recognized the challenges faced by many First Nations in managing solid waste on reserve. It launched a \$409 million, five-year First Nations Solid Waste Management Initiative (referred to as the “solid waste initiative”), starting in 2016-2017. This evaluation was outlined in the fiscal year 2019-20 Indigenous Services Canada (ISC) Five Year Evaluation Plan and completed in 2021-22.

Methodology

The evaluation covers the period from April 2016 to September 2020. Data collection occurred between November 2019 and January 2021. Since the Initiative is relatively new and has primarily output-level performance data available, the evaluation took a formative approach – examining program relevance, performance, and efficiency with a view to determining progress toward outcomes and potential improvements. Research for the evaluation consisted of a comprehensive document review, literature review, analysis of the Initiative’s administrative data, interviews, and case studies of FNSWMI projects in individual First Nations and ISC regions. Data collection was paused for six months in 2020 owing to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The evaluation team sought to take a participatory approach to involve Indigenous stakeholders as much as possible. This involved means such as including a senior Indigenous evaluator on the team, planning data collection with First Nations communities to adapt to their needs and preferences, and establishing an Evaluation Advisory Committee with representation from ISC, First Nations and Indigenous organizations to provide input on the methodology and all major deliverables.

Key Findings

The evaluation found that the Initiative responds to longstanding needs in First Nations for dedicated funding in support of adequate solid waste management. While most First Nations in Canada receive either direct or indirect funding through this Initiative and funding was broadly dispersed among remote communities and those living near urban centres, two issues persist: (1) there are gaps in providing adequate funding for the operations and maintenance of solid waste management systems; and, (2) First Nations living near urban centres and which are members of a tribal council are slightly more likely to access funding.

ISC has been generally effective in its delivery of the Initiative and it contributed to greater awareness of solid waste management issues, increased education levels, and improved solid waste management systems for First Nations. However, gaps in available performance data prevented a full appreciation of what has been accomplished as a result of this program. The data collected from respondents highlighted five areas that can be improved: (1) the operations and maintenance funding formula; (2) in some instances, a lack of emphasis on awareness and education; (3) the proposal submission is complex and funding delays occur; (4) gaps in solid waste federal regulations; and (5) little post-closure monitoring.

The evaluation findings supported that the proposal-based model used for the Solid Waste Management Initiative funding is appropriate for major capital components, but other

components require more stable, longer-term funding mechanisms. These include components such as operations and maintenance, planning, capacity development, and community engagement and education, for which longer-term grants or core funding are the preferred funding mechanisms.

Although the transfer of services to Indigenous partners is one of ISC's strategic priorities and was an intended goal in the original conception of the Initiative, only small steps toward service transfer have been taken. For full service transfer to occur, the following enabling conditions need to be present: sustainable and reliable funding; strengthened delivery capacity of Indigenous technical organizations and tribal councils; clarified program administration; and an enabled policy and regulatory environment.

Best practices found during the evaluation were also noted: Community-based planning can be inclusive and effective for identifying solid waste management needs and solutions. Ongoing training and capacity development in First Nations are essential. Enlisting the services of Indigenous technical organizations as well as tribal councils in the Initiative has proven promising. The costs of delaying action on solid waste are greater in the long run than providing adequate funding for waste management now, with respect to health and environmental impacts of poorly disposed waste.

1. Allocate sufficient, reliable, long-term funding for the Solid Waste Management Initiative. The funding should provide adequate financial support to First Nations for the ongoing costs of operating and maintaining solid waste management systems.
2. Strengthen delivery of Solid Waste Management Initiative through the following:
 - a. Examine and implement methods that will enhance community-led planning practices, decision-making practices, incentivise knowledge transfer from consultants to First Nations, and boost the funding directed to capacity building, engagement, and training;
 - b. Strengthen coordination between Lands and Economic Development sector and Community Infrastructure sector to better serve First Nations by simplifying and streamlining the approval and delivery process for solid waste management infrastructure projects;
 - c. Apply GBA Plus to solid waste projects, program design and delivery; and
 - d. Develop and implement a performance measurement system to monitor progress toward the program's outcomes, which should include the enhanced monitoring of solid waste management investments.
3. Assess and revise the National and Regional contracting and procurement policies to encourage and support First Nations, First Nation owned companies, and Indigenous organizations to deliver their own service.
4. Continue working with Environment and Climate Change Canada, Indigenous stakeholders, and provinces to plan, develop, or modify regulations to support effective solid waste management in First Nations.
5. In keeping with the Department's commitment to support Indigenous communities and organizations to exercise jurisdiction in the design, delivery, and management of services, work with First Nation partners to chart a path toward sustainable service transfer of solid waste management responsibilities.