

DYNAMICS OF RURAL & NORTHERN MANITOBA

Submission to the Manitoba Electoral Divisions Boundaries Commission

Introduction

The Rural Development Institute (RDI) was contacted by Elections Manitoba on behalf of the Manitoba Electoral Divisions Boundaries Commission in November 2017 to report on the state of rural Manitoba. Such a report was intended to inform the Commission's broad public consultation process as mandated by the Electoral Divisions Act. RDI is pleased to offer this report in aid of the Commission's deliberations. The scope of this report is to highlight significant issues, challenges, and opportunities impacting on population changes or trends in rural communities and regions in Manitoba.

Since its inception in 1989, RDI has been active in applied research projects undertaken in consultation with rural and northern communities in Manitoba and elsewhere in Canada. The experience and expertise garnered through these projects, especially research conducted over the last eight years on issues ranging from regional economic development, and rural infrastructure and service to rural immigration, agro-food innovation, and community capacity development inform this submission. Based on our collective research background, this report brings together often disparate topics from different disciplines centred on four key themes as a way to bring attention to the dynamics of rural Manitoba. Our view is one that stretches across a rural landscape and engages the lived experience of residents, businesses, and government agencies. We also offer questions in an effort to broaden our understanding of the nature of Manitoba's varied rural regions. Yet this paper, like the previous one a decade ago by RDI, does not offer an interpretation of the themes in relation to the Commission's mandate where population change is the major variable under consideration. Rather, we have offered more of a narrative, hoping to inform and provoke interest in rural and northern Manitoba, which still remain intimately connected to Winnipeg.

Population Numbers are Not the Only Descriptor of Rural Manitoba

Statistics Canada (2017c) reports from the 2016 Census that Canada's population was close to 35.15 million of which 10.2 million resided in non-metro areas (outside of Census Metropolitan Areas), which accounts for 29.4% for the country as a whole. In contrast, Manitoba's population was 1.28 million with 0.5 million (38%) living in rural regions and communities. This statistic distinguishes Manitoba as rural from the other provinces, but not as significantly as the net natural demographic growth projections from 2018 to 2038 that are based on 2001-2014 birth and death figures (Manitoba Bureau of Statistics, 2015). Unlike other provinces where net growth is projected to remain negative, Manitoba's natural population growth rate is expected to stay positive at 1.3% over the 2018 to 2038 period. Manitoba's positive rate is due in part to the Aboriginal natural population growth rate of 42.5% across Canada since 2006, over four times the rate for non-Aboriginals over the same period (Statistics Canada, 2017a). As telling is the 2016 census statistic that close to 223,000 or 17.5% of the province's total population self-identified as Aboriginal, the highest percentage of all provinces (Statistics Canada, 2017a).

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This contrasts sharply from the 15.5% in the 2006 Census (Government of Manitoba, 2010). Saskatchewan is the next closest at 16.3% for 2016 and 14.9% in 2006. This percentage of 17.5% in Manitoba for 2016, as elsewhere across Canada, and its increase over time from previous censuses, has been attributed by Statistics Canada to two factors: the increase in the natural growth rate and the increase in numbers of Aboriginal peoples (First Nation, Metis, and Inuit) who have self-identified as Aboriginal.

The above demographic snapshot identifies Manitoba as unique compared to the other provinces. This attention to population numbers in Manitoba regions is an essential criterion for the Commission in resolving its deliberations on whether or not to adjust electoral division boundaries. Appreciating the significance of population gain and loss is an important factor in understanding the various areas across rural and northern Manitoba.

Nonetheless, a narrow focus on population count understates if not distorts other significant factors that differentiate regions in Manitoba. Demographics relating to education levels or employment rates in key sectors, or services provided locally in a rural community add a new level of understanding who lives, plays and works there. Even if these statistics were provided, they do not fully capture the sense of enterprise, fellowship, and kinship, the familial link through ownership and attachment to the land, that can energize and motivate residents to pull together when faced with hardship or disaster, or when undertaking a community project or establishing a business enterprise. These other factors are as pertinent for understanding how the demographic, economic, and geographic conditions of the province's regions are not static but dynamic enough to push, pull, constrain and mobilize neighbouring communities and even those more distant. Consider the unique historic and cultural heritages that continue to shape Virden, Norway House, and Steinbach. Each has come to serve as an important regional centre; however, their demographics, whether in terms of age, culture, education level, or language, are significantly different. Concerns regarding employment, health, and housing may be common to all three places, but their economic prosperity, business acumen, and commercial specialization vary as much as their geographies, amenities, and local sports rivalries.

The import of these factors is to illustrate how Manitoba, as across Canada, can be more aptly understood in terms of at least three rurals (Ashton & McCullough, 2014; CRRF, 2015; du Plessis, Beshiri, & Bollman, 2001). The first rural includes communities adjacent to urban cities where their growth often matches the national average. These are often labeled as thriving. Extraction is what the second set of rural communities have in common. They rely on the natural resources of mining, forestry, fishing, grain, and cattle, producing about 80% of the market value of these resources in Canada. This set faces the daunting task of weathering the inevitable boom and bust cycles in national and international markets, which directly impact the workers, their families, and many others employed in these industries and other tertiary sectors. The third rural includes communities and regions struggling with limited capacity and resources, higher unemployment, often declining populations, and yet continue to struggle to survive.

Although these three rurals are differentiated in terms of economic sectors, challenges, and opportunities, this notion of three rural overlaps reasonably well with the Elections Manitoba organizational scheme based on geographical location, which groups rural electoral divisions into three regions – the North, Southwest and Southeast. Given the province's two largest urban centres of Winnipeg (pop. 778,500) and Brandon (pop. 48,900) (Statistics Canada, 2017c), the rural electoral divisions ringing Winnipeg in particular and those around Brandon are representative of the first rural group. The second rural accounts for the four electoral divisions in the North and many of the twenty-two in the Southwest and Southeast. The third rural, which might be considered as a bit of an outlier in terms of geographic location, describes any number of smaller rural or northern towns across the province facing a much steeper and entrenched struggle - though not an impossible future.

This overview creates a context for the four themes to be discussed. These themes touching on rural economic regions, agriculture, natural resources, and Aboriginal communities are included since each has a significant place in Manitoba's broad rural landscape. Each theme is presented separately but admittedly issues and challenges arising in one overlap and are often interwoven with those from the other themes. Moreover, additional themes focusing on rural immigration, rural community services, and infrastructure, to name just three, could have been included in a more encompassing report. The goal remains, however, that the four themes examined here can provoke reflection and inform new insights pertinent to rural Manitoba.

Theme 1. Functional Economic Rural Regions as Self-contained Labour Areas

Research undertaken by RDI underscores the reality that rural and northern communities are variable, much like non-metro regions are not the "same" but can be conceived as, at least, "three rurals". From a community economic perspective, it would be reasonable to anticipate that what plans and projects work in one case might not in another. Research findings from the 2015 project Growth Strategies for Rural Communities: Six Case Studies (Ashton, Patterson, Zarry, & Kelly, 2015) underscored this hypothesis: rural municipalities do use varying strategies in attempts to establish a more robust business climate. The case analyses found that some communities focused on maintaining a skilled labour force to sustain this economic growth, while others succeeded in attracting and settling international immigrants (Ashton, Pettigrew, Galatsanou, & Wilkinson, 2015; Bollman & Ashton, 2014d). Some development efforts appeared more restrained in risk-taking, while in other communities, their economic schemes were the result of long-term strategic planning. At another extreme, some community responses have been reactive, where centres, for instance, Deloraine and many others, have experienced a reduction in services that has hindered their efforts to remain vibrant, despite their attempted political engagements.

The issue here is that how well a rural region functions economically does have a direct bearing on how they are able to retain or possibly grow their population base, or to adjust to a population decline while remaining economically viable. The economic vitality of a rural region is not the only factor responsible for attracting and/ or retaining its resident population, but it is critical. The implication for the Commission to consider is that as the economic base of a region ebbs and flows so too will its population, which in turn may lead to a realignment of rural electoral division boundaries. Yet when altering a boundary, does the new resident in the electoral division share the same home to work region? If not, some in the electoral division may not reflect its residents' experience of community at a local or even regional level, although the electoral division does provide for individuals' electoral representation ("Irked Manitoba MLA", 2008).

Given this distinction, communities, in the most traditional sense, are places where people live, work, recreate, and shop. Today, with highways and vehicles, the geography of a community is stretched to many municipalities. Travel on a daily basis is much more regionalized but sometimes very localized in terms of attaining and retaining employment. Individuals, families, and businesses attain their service needs such as governmental and professional services (e.g. building permits and banking), education, and health in centres within their region. To better understand these multi-community regions based on travel-to-work patterns, RDI undertook an applied research project to reconceptualise rural localities in terms of Self-Contained Labour Areas (SLAs) – based on where residents live and travel to work (Ashton, Kelly, & Bollman, 2013a). The research findings identify twenty-seven SLAs across the province including nine SLAs in northern municipalities and Indian Reserves and nineteen in the south. The algorithmic approach developed by Munro, Alasia, and Bollman (2011) determines that the "threshold for self-containment has been reached ... [when] most residents with jobs are working in the given labour area and most [often 80% or more] individuals living in the given labour area are also working in the given labour market area" (p. 15).

These SLAs focus centrally on those residents who live and work in the regions, but it also accounts for those who travel normally to centres to shop and attain business and community services. Our study acknowledges that SLAs are not "hermetically sealed" units, for some services such as specialized medical care may require more distant travel. Given its focus on employment, this model does seem to present a bias towards particular residents, that is, those who participate in the labour force. It seems to exclude retirees, those with limited employment capabilities, agricultural workers, for example, who are genuinely members of the economic region. Despite this weakness in the model, rearticulating rural regions in terms of self-contained labour areas has a number of important advantages for government agencies, rural community leadership, and rural businesses involved in local and regional community development planning, by:

- ▶ Broadening their understanding of rural beyond a fixation on a municipality town's limits,
- ▶ Accounting for the close relationships of residents working and living within particular rural municipalities, and perhaps, more importantly, adjoining municipalities, and

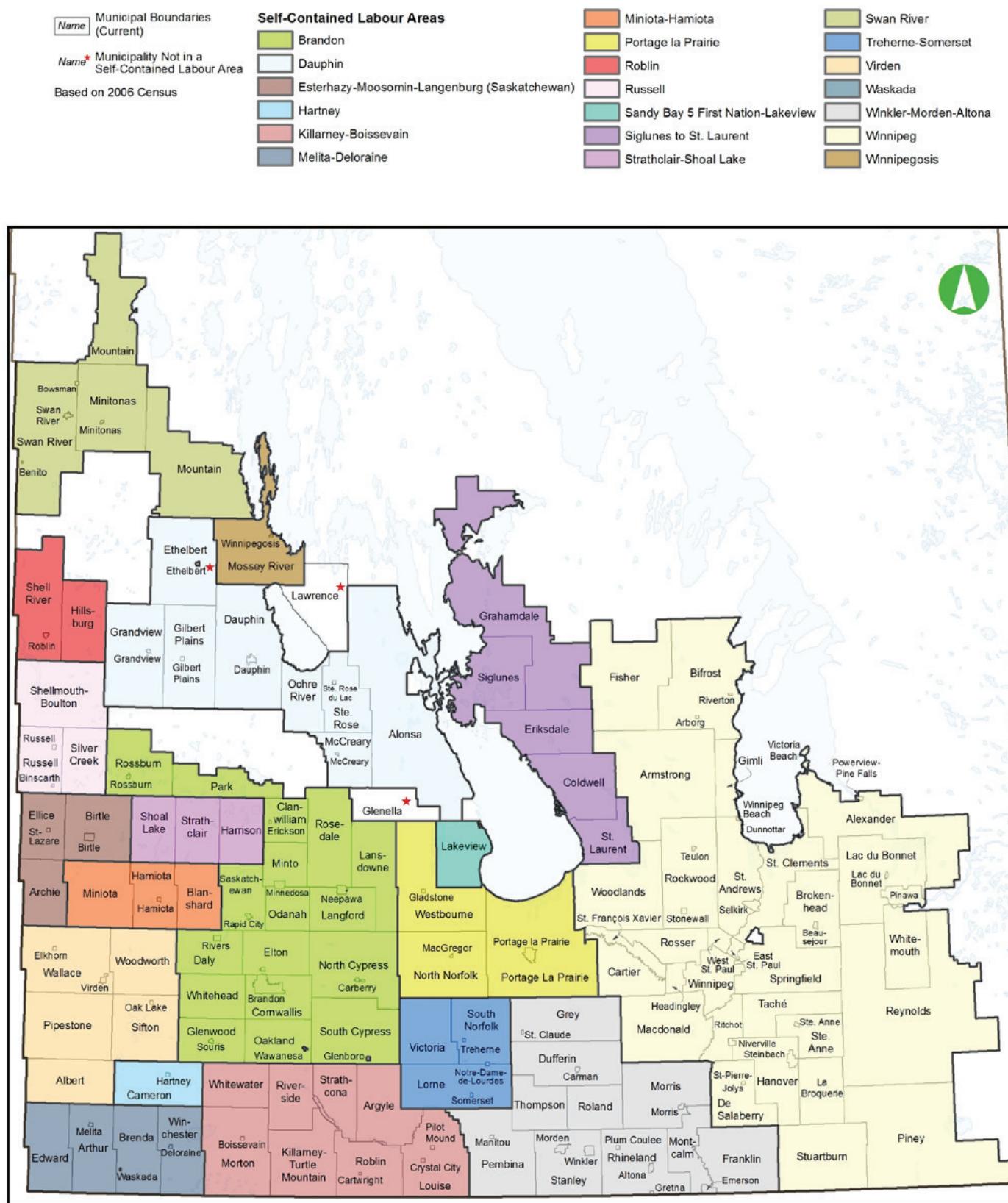
- ▶ Providing an analytical tool for assessing the strength and capacity of rural municipalities "to improve and maintain quality of services and to grow and change with the economy" (Ashton, Bollman & Kelly, 2013b, p. 3).

One coincidence of this regional framework is that it provides a foundation for understanding the connections among rural municipalities and their residents that are grouped together in relation to the various electoral divisions. By conceiving electoral divisions more as SLAs and less as mere geographical areas, electoral representation at an SLA level may better reflect the interests and concerns of residents sharing and embodying closer regional community connections and affiliations within a region. After comparing SLAs with rural electoral divisions, there is a general concordance where many electoral division boundaries do seem to align with SLAs boundaries in the province's south-west, and south-central regions (See Comparative Maps below). Examples of boundary overlap (or near overlap) include the electoral divisions of Arthur-Virden, and others. Given such instances at this time, the Commission may have an opportunity to adjust electoral division boundaries according to population but also in terms SLA regional/community interactions and employment travel patterns.

Key Policy Questions

- ▶ ***Is there value in having electoral divisions align more closely with modern rural regions or self-contained labour areas which coincide with where people live and work?***
- ▶ ***Are rural peoples' experiences, history, culture, and language duly acknowledged in an electoral division's population count?***
- ▶ ***Can current population counts alone accurately reflect boundaries of electoral divisions? Or is the loss of population likely to be selective be it by gender, income, or some other characteristic that might undermine relatively equal access to electoral representation by all citizens?***

Southern Manitoba Municipalities and Self-Contained Labour Areas



Source: <http://www.electionsmanitoba.ca/en/Resources/Maps>

Comparative Maps

2008 Boundaries for Southwest Manitoba



Source: <http://www.electionsmanitoba.ca/en/Resources/Maps>

Theme 2. Agricultural Innovation: Production, Processing, and New Technologies

The stereotype of southern Manitoba as an agriculture heartland with broad fields of wheat and rye primary has long past. Farmers have adapted to new crops of canola, corn, and more recently have embraced soybean. The integration of high-tech, advanced tillage practices, and precision agriculture are means of remaining cost-competitive while reaching into international markets. The cancellation of the Canadian Wheat Board in 2012 required grain farmers to take on more selling responsibilities because of globalization. These adaptations and innovations have also been developing across all sectors associated with agriculture, including pork and beef production, food processing, and agricultural manufacturing and technology.

RDI's recent research (Bollman & Ashton, 2014c) reports that over the period from 2002 to 2012, agriculture stands 5th in Manitoba GDP in non-metro areas, and 3% on the province's total GDP. This ranking remained consistent even in 2016 and 2017 (Government of Manitoba, 2016a; 2017a). More telling is the GDP valuation of particular agricultural related sectors. Figures 1 and 2 from Bollman & Ashton's Factsheet on GDP in Agriculture and Food Processing (2014b) illustrate the changing dynamic of these sectors but also growth opportunities in terms of market exports and employment gains that may be realized through additional investments and innovations.

2008 Boundaries for Southeast Manitoba

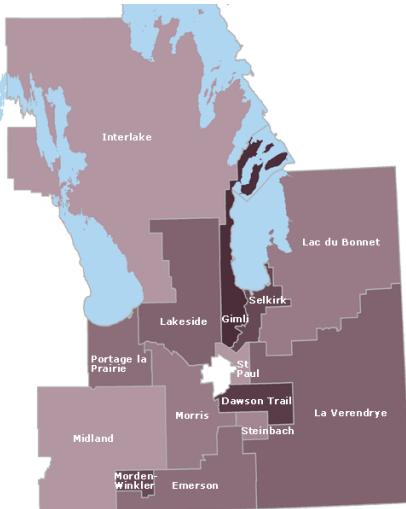


Figure 1. In Manitoba, the GDP from crop production is about double the GDP for livestock production

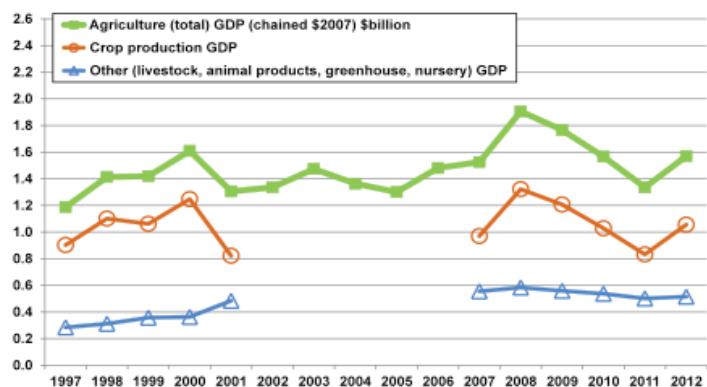
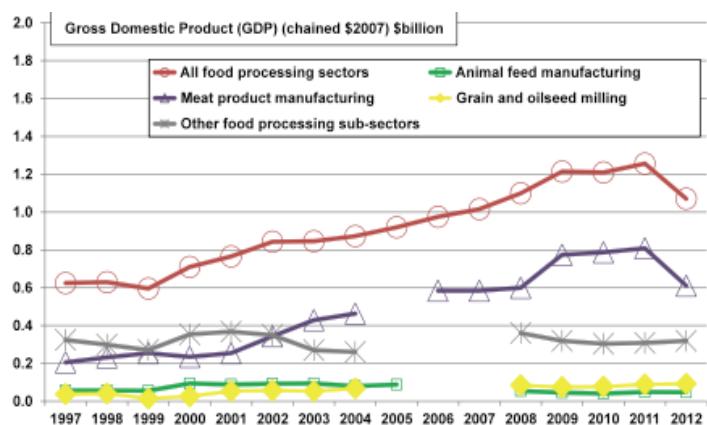


Figure 2. The growth in food processing GDP in Manitoba has been due to the growth in meat product processing



Source: (Bollman & Ashton, 2014b, p. 2).

The Government of Manitoba (2017a, 2017b) provides a similar appraisal of the importance of food processing and agricultural manufacturing and technology sectors, noting that both sectors employ over 18,000 people in more than 700 facilities and firms.

This embrace of food processing and agribusiness manufacturing and technology is a sure sign of the continued evolution and innovation reshaping agriculture in Manitoba. RDI's case study analyses of innovation in food processing (Ashton, Galatsanou, Richards, & Woods, 2015; Ashton, Richards, & Warrener, 2017) highlight that innovation occurs all along the supply chain from the development of new processes and products to changes in organization and marketing strategies. Of added significance is that partnerships and stakeholders with expertise are necessary to move innovative ideas to commercialization, such as the Food Development Centre located Portage La Prairie. This central location has been instrumental in providing guidance and network connections for new agri-food developments that have taken advantage of the local infrastructure and transportation links. Similar advantages have been important for enterprises involved in advanced manufacturing in the centres of Altona, Morden, Winkler, and Steinbach.

The shift towards value-adding enterprises has opened new employment opportunities for attracting skilled labour from rural residents who remain committed to agricultural but are interested in off-farm work, as well as attracting new immigrants. Two examples of such value-added enterprises are the pork processing operations, Maple Leaf and Hylife, which have boosted population growth in Brandon and Neepawa. A third example of this growing emphasis of value-added agriculture is the recent discussions commenced by Westman Opportunities Leadership Group (encouraged nearly three decades earlier by RDI), which includes Brandon University and RDI as stakeholders, to establish a soybean processing plant in Manitoba. This project has significant support from the federal and provincial governments in addition to key agricultural organizations. Though this venture will take years to commence operation (if undertaken), it would process soybeans coming from the three million acres seeded to oilseeds in Manitoba and Saskatchewan: seeds that would otherwise be destined for export markets. A fourth well-known example, showcased on CBC's Dragon Den, includes Neepawa's Farmery Estate Brewery. RDI's research on risk-adversity (Bryant et al., 2017) shows that diligent planning and taking advantage of expertise and business supports can aid businesses in moving forward from innovative ideas to commercial success. These new innovations are widespread in their applications, which have facilitated, for instance, the operations of large industrial-scale farms with fewer employees, but they also require significant government (federal and provincial) supports and private sector interventions and investments, such as, advising in product prototyping and marketing. Likewise, maintaining regional development momentum in the agricultural sector is difficult, needing concerted community-level planning and visionary local champions who can spearhead projects and navigate through bureaucracies.

These examples of innovation and diversification across a broad range of agro-related sectors have helped to moderate rural depopulation in some rural communities but this outcome is far from uniform across

agricultural communities in the province. It is well known that the family farm is contending with an aging generation of owners, who may not have their operations taken over by their children. To address this shrinking labour pool, many farm owners have embraced the need to innovate, in particular drawing on advances in broadband and other information technologies, whether in terms of precision agriculture that has helped to cut input costs (e.g. fertilizers), robotics that may open the door to driverless vehicles, and real-time market analyses that aid in reaching export markets (Arora, 2017). Though Canada and Manitoba continue to ship raw agro-materials and livestock with little or no value-added processing, entrepreneurship has taken hold leading to the growth of new enterprises and stronger labour needs. It is more than a simple population count that is needed to understand the dynamics of rural and the related economic structures across the region.

It remains to be seen whether the new employment opportunities (and population gains) due to value-added agrifood processing and agribusiness manufacturing enterprises have or will compensate for population losses in regions engaged in traditional agriculture production. Rural communities that have gained a foothold in establishing and expanding new value-added agribusinesses will certainly have helped to stabilize population levels in some southern rural electoral divisions. Charting these shifts in employment levels in all agricultural sectors across southern Manitoba will be important factors for the Commission to consider, especially in light of the region's population changes, since the Commission's 2008 Report.

Key Policy Question

- *In the last 10 years, what population impacts have accrued by advancing value-added processing in rural Manitoba's agro-product exports? What are the population impacts over the next generation, be it 10 to 20 years?*

Theme 3. Manitoba's Resource North – Mining and Forestry

The Government of Manitoba reports, based on preliminary estimates as of February 2017, that the value of mining was estimated at \$1.3 billion, with close to 40 companies involved in mining and exploration. Also based on preliminary estimates as of March 2017, the oil and petroleum industry was valued at \$750 million and served by more than 40 companies, including multinationals and locally owned enterprises. Both mining and petroleum employ approximately 5,200 people (in 2016) and represent 3.5% of GDP in 2015 and 6.3% of exports in 2015 (Government of Manitoba, 2016b). It is noteworthy that the Fraser Institute (2017) ranks Manitoba 2nd in the world for mining investments and attractiveness. Capital expenditures for mining and petroleum were estimated at \$877 million in 2015 (Government of Manitoba, 2017d). Hydropower is even more capital intensive than mining and petroleum. The province's utility estimates that \$15 billion will be invested in hydro generation and transmission over the next 10-15 years. Currently, 15 dams on five major river systems generate over 5,400-megawatts - MW (Manitoba Hydro, 2017a). Due for completion in 2021, the Keeyask dam will add another 700 MW to the current capacity. This project is a key partnership between MB Hydro and four Manitoba First Nations: Tataskweyak Cree Nation, War Lake First Nation, York Factory First Nation, and Fox Lake Cree Nation, and may serve as a model for new ventures (Manitoba Hydro, 2017b).

These industries are beneficial for northern communities and aboriginal peoples, but as elsewhere in Canada, Manitoba has had to contend with the rollercoaster ride of the resource economy. Most resource-based communities experience a boom in hiring as operations commence that leads eventually to a bust period as the industry winds down. Too often, the decision to stay or close is made offshore, out of the reach of Manitoba and Canada. Over the last three years, a series of events or announcements have cast a long shadow of economic instability over many communities in Manitoba's north; e.g. pending mine closures in Thompson and Flin Flon, or changing ownership of the forestry mill in The Pas (Jenish, 2017; Macdonald, 2016; Nickel, 2015). The impacts of these events have not been limited to single communities but rather, have affected much of the structures and the networks that bind many Northern communities together. The loss of a primary employer in a single industry community affects supporting tertiary employers, which in turn impacts other community services. In some cases, it seems the closure of one industry precipitates a cascading effect, and where there are fewer jobs, residents leave for better employment opportunities elsewhere.

The challenge is that, despite their geographical remoteness and service as regional centres, northern communities and their resource-based industries have become even more inextricably linked to global commodity prices and the play of supply and demand. These industries require large investments, long-term commitment, and a realization that changing circumstances are inevitable. In the case of non-renewable resources, when the global market prices trend downward and international owners seek to

avoid more financial risk, a closure can be imminent unless other resource sources are found to be economically viable. Talk of potash mining in Manitoba is just one example of a recent casualty in the mining industries. What was once a promising venture in the Russell area has fallen short, considering very high start-up costs and the current glut of supply. Hydro may fair better as a renewable resource, but exports can be fickle. New natural gas hydro generation and other renewables in the United States have become a serious impediment to securing long-term exports to what was seen as an easier market than to Manitoba's neighbouring provinces, Saskatchewan and Ontario. This loss of a once reliable market has fuelled public debate (Barghout, 2017; Martin, 2018) over the costs of paying down the high public debt and whether the Keeyask dam might be prohibitively expensive over the long-term even to continue with the construction.

Three resource centres, Flin Flon, Thompson, and The Pas, are clear examples of the changing resource uncertainty. Though its 2008 report noted that prospects were favouring a boom (Wood, 2008), Hudbay has since announced it will be closing mine 777 in late 2020 (Naylor, 2017b), even though it has served as the cornerstone of Flin Flon's economy for over 90 years. The company is continuing to develop the Lalor mine, located in Snow Lake, 215 km east of Flin Flon, which began producing in late 2014. It has also been exploring a proposal to keep the zinc processing plant running at reduced capacity but this seems to amount to a stopgap measure. With the mine's wind-down, Hudbay estimates over 500 people will lose their jobs – 200 by direct layoff and the rest through attrition or retirement. Reporting for the Flin Flon Reminder, Naylor (2017a) reflects that, “[at] worst, Flin Flon could lose 800 to 900 jobs, leaving the city with a small fraction of the company's Manitoba workforce.” The effect of the downturn is already evident in the loss of over 300 residents between 2011 (5,100) and 2016 (4790) censuses; as job losses continue, the rate of population reduction may well accelerate.

Similar circumstances loom large for Thompson in the aftermath of Brazilian mining conglomerate Vale's announcement in November 2010 to close the Thompson smelting and refinery operation by 2018. The timing of this announcement has enabled Thompson to commence the hard planning to adjust to this eventuality and to retool as a more diverse regional hub serving other northern communities as a commercial, healthcare, and educational centre. Though Vale employs 1,500 people (Vale, 2017), or close to 11% of Thompson's population in 2016 and is currently investing \$120 million into its other mining operations in Thompson (such as the Birchtree Mine (Crosby, 2017)), the refining closure will be extremely disruptive. It will impact local businesses that contract to Vale, service industries of Thompson, schools, and recreation within the City, nearby communities, such as Nelson House, that have a large number of members working in Thompson, and many other communities that look to Thompson as a hub of activity.

The threatened loss of Tolko Industries in The Pas has had a better fate with the agreement of Canadian Kraft Paper Industries, Ltd. agreeing to buy the latter's operation and assets. The forestry industry remains the largest employer with over 300 people in the town, but it is subject to the demand for paper products. While significant private and public investments were deployed to shore up

efficiencies in the operations of the plant, while under management by Tolko Industries and its predecessors, Canadian Kraft Paper has its work cut out for itself to ensure the plant's long-term viability.

A troubling event jarring the north was the cancelation of the shipping season at the Port of Churchill in the summer of 2016 and the washout of parts of the line due to the spring flood. This decision was in part due to the Canadian Wheat Board closure, resulting in the slow demise of the port as an export terminal. The immediate loss of over 120 permanent and seasonal railway and port workers in the town has had a ripple effect on its tourism industry and other services. As importantly as the effects on Churchill, the loss of this rail line reaches back to the first rail mile and also affects The Pas. There is no clear future at present with legal wrangling between Omnitrax, the federal and provincial governments, other northern communities, and aboriginal stakeholders. Eventually, the future of Omnitrax will be resolved, but until then, the uncertainty of rail transportation will impact each community situated along the Bay Line ("Residents rail against U.S. company as Port Churchill's future is on the line", 2017).

These feast to famine cycles in these industrial sectors are typical of many rural communities engaged in resource extraction. The development of such enterprises provides a lucrative boom for the community's livelihood attracting new residents, housing construction, and establishing other commercial operations. The boom phase can be a long-term one, as it was for Flin Flon, but invariably there is an end to its cycle, sometimes with an abrupt closure that precipitates a rapid loss of a town's population. While northern resource centres such as Thompson and Flin Flon may look to economic diversification to help build a more stable future, it is certainly not a quick or a certain solution to such circumstances. In the near term, the populations of Thompson and Flin Flon may be stable enough to warrant retaining the configuration of the five northern electoral divisions' boundaries. However, in the mid-term, perhaps ten years hence to coincide with the Commission's 2028 Report, significant population losses over the north may lead the Commission to face the very difficult question of proposing to reduce the number of northern electoral divisions to four.

Key Policy Question

- ***With Northern resources industries currently in a downturn, will the recovery be transformational leading towards a more resilient northern economy and stable population?***

Theme 4. Indigenous Communities

Indigenous communities across the province have undergone considerable changes since the Manitoba Boundary Commission's 2008 Report. According to Statistics Canada in 2016, the Indigenous population was 223,310 in Manitoba accounting for 17.5% of its total population with about 41.6% of this total (approx. 46,000) living in the Winnipeg CMA (Statistics Canada, 2017c). Also significant are the high percentages of Aboriginal people residing in Thompson (42.9%) at 5,900 (2.6% of the province's total), and Portage la Prairie (30%) at 4,000 (1.9% of the Province's total).

Age, education, and employment are other important demographic dimensions of this population. Compared with 30% of the non-Aboriginal population, almost half (49.1%) of the Aboriginal peoples in Manitoba are under the age of 25 with an average age of 29.3 in 2016 (Statistics Canada, 2017c). Education rates have advanced with 40.7% of the Aboriginal population in Manitoba between the ages of 25 and 64 having completed a postsecondary certificate, diploma, or degree from a trade school, college, or university. Nonetheless, high school diploma or equivalent certificate completion rates for those between the ages of 15 and 24 remains low at 39.4% (Statistics Canada, 2017c). This compares to 65.5% for non-Aborigines of the same age group. Higher employment rates for Aboriginal peoples have been made over the last number of years due to stronger participation rates that may in part be attributed to higher education levels (Government of Canada, 2017).

A number of challenges continue to overshadow indigenous communities: too many still experience daily long-standing problems of drinkable water, inadequate housing, and limited job prospects. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission in 2015, and final report with 94 "Calls to Action" spoke to Canada, but equally spoke to Manitoba. The legacy of colonialism that disrupted language, culture, and traditional practices will take generations to heal.

Many of these challenges are apparent in too many Aboriginal communities across the province, and seem most acute to those with limited access to highways, are fly-in, or reliant on winter roads. These communities create a fourth type of rural in Manitoba – fly-in or limited access. As experienced by those in Churchill and any community reliant on a single mode of transportation, food security is critical. Warmer winters have shortened the shipping season on Manitoba's winter roads, an essential link for basic supplies and equipment to what are otherwise fly-in communities. Food costs for these communities have sky-rocketed, with the federal food subsidy food program under-performing (Office of the Auditor General, 2014). This means a greater reliance on traditional hunting and fishing.

Natural disasters such as floods and forest fires have seemingly become the new norm in the age of global warming. For example, the fallout from the floods of Lake St. Martin in 2011 and 2014 continues to this day, since over 1000 residents remain housed in hotels in Winnipeg. A second more recent example is the loss of the

rail line to Churchill due to spring flooding. Also, forest and wild fires this past summer also led to major evacuations to centres in the south. For many northern communities, these geographical and cultural dislocations have led to long-lasting disruptions about what to do, where to go, and where to turn for mentorship, guidance, and leadership.

Reliance on the elders and those in leadership roles has been positive in many communities through the development of community capacity building and expertise, but it has come at a cost where these individuals are overly relied upon when community supports in health care and social services are insufficient. This lack of services and other amenities such as recreational outlets and few job opportunities has also impacted the youth in many communities. The tragic results have become too well documented in the media: lower high school graduation rates, cases of self-harm, drug abuse, and physical violence. The importance of community seems increasingly foundational as a necessity of moving forward.

These circumstances have prompted many communities to explore opportunities in economic diversity beyond jobs in the service sectors of community government, education, and health or to become much more entrepreneurial in terms of developing a more sustainable indigenous economy quite separate from entering the workforce in sectors close to their community. What this new economy will ultimately become is unclear since it remains understudied at present, although the hope is that it will lead to the development of goods and services, which will appeal to more than local needs. These community economic developments may have an impact on residents who might consider leaving the communities for southern or urban centres.

Given the weak economic climate in some First Nation communities, however, some have embarked on enterprise developments such as urban reserves (Government of Canada, 2014) An urban reserve is a designation of land attained through a Treaty Land Entitlement Agreement to serve neighbouring municipalities, to strengthen the community's economic foundation as well as to establish stronger social, cultural, and environmental relations. As compared to Saskatchewan that has over fifty, the first of which was established in 1988 in Saskatoon (Exner-Pirot, n.d.), only seven urban reserves are currently operating across Manitoba. These include Opaskwayak Cree Nation close to The Pas, Nisichawaysihk Cree Nation in Thompson, and Sapotaweyak Cree Nation in Swan River, Swan Lake First Nation in Headingley, Roseau River Anishinabe First Nation near to Winnipeg, and two belonging to Long Plain First Nation, one close to Portage la Prairie and the other within Winnipeg. In its study Look North, the Government of Manitoba (2017c) reports there is a growing interest in more urban reserves. Yet another example of such aspirations to manage their own affairs includes Sioux Valley Dakota Nation. It is one community in Canada with a self-government agreement with the Federal Government, assuming control in 2014 over its administration, financial management, housing, education, public safety, and many other areas.

Although many First Nations communities have experienced significant population growth, urban reserves and other initiatives

may lead to more vibrant and economically resilient communities. In time these efforts could counter-balance the population losses that are anticipated in other northern resource industry centres. Maintaining population growth over the province's northern region, and particularly in First Nations communities, may help to forestall major shifts in northern electoral division boundaries.

Key Policy Questions

- *In the spirit of reconciliation and partnership, can we make room for more Aboriginal peoples to enrich all communities across the province?*
- *Can community and economic developments led by Aboriginal peoples lead to sustained population growth across all regions of the province thereby helping to consolidate provincial electoral division boundaries?*

Conclusion

RDI's varied and diverse research topics contribute to the undertaking of the Manitoba Electoral Divisions Boundaries Commission. For beneath these projects' many case studies, focus group, interviews, and surveys are the stories of people living their lives in rural regions and home communities. The four themes included ranging from functional economic regions, agriculture, natural resources and Aboriginal peoples are also not incidental. Each theme characterizes an important dimension of Manitoba and how rural and northern folk and indigenous peoples live, work, and interact with one another in their local communities, their rural regions, and even with others around the globe.

Looking towards the next ten years, this outlook on rural and northern communities as well as their sense of economic stability, social reliance, and confidence are important issues for the Commission's consideration in their current deliberation on electoral division boundaries. The rise and fall of the population in rural communities and regions, whether in the north or the south, depends heavily on their resilience to internal and external pressures and their economic sustainability. All rural communities have become far less isolated with national and even global forces impinging on people's lives. For communities, families, and enterprises engaged in agriculture and agro-food processing, economic viability and growth pivot on developing a more global perspective. Yet despite their efforts to remain viable, shifts in markets and exports can be disruptive, leading to job losses which can compel many families with roots on the farm to pick up stakes and move to larger towns or urban centres. The same impacts apply for those employed in or reliant on Manitoba's resources industries. The expected downturn in two of Manitoba's northern centres will lead to job losses, and it will remain to be seen how dramatic the population loss will be in the near- and mid-term prior to the Commission's next reporting period. At present, the boundaries of northern electoral divisions appear secure based on employment levels, but these numbers are bound to change. Aboriginal communities face unique, perhaps competing challenges, remaining true to their culture and heritage while also participating more actively in theirs and Manitoba's economy. Whether the latter will lead many to leave their communities for education and jobs is an issue the Commission will also have to consider in drawing up electoral boundaries if these numbers are significant.

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