

# Women's Wellbeing in Happy Valley-Goose Bay: Findings of the 2018 Community Wellbeing Survey

November 2018

## A Briefing Note to Intervenors at the Commission of Inquiry Respecting the Muskrat Falls Project

### Key Messages

1. Ongoing monitoring and mitigation (using GBA+) of the project's impacts is vital and has been overlooked by the proponents.
2. Findings from the Wellbeing Survey initiated by the Community Vitality Index (CVI) Steering Committee<sup>1</sup> show that there are limited positive effects being felt by women in the community. Most women survey respondents note that they are being detrimentally impacted by this project.

### Survey Description

The Community Wellbeing Survey – from which the results below are drawn – is intended to document and monitor changes to community wellbeing over time. The survey is open to all residents of Happy Valley-Goose Bay and the Upper Lake Melville area, aged 13 and over. This project receives support from the Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada.

This survey was initiated because the Joint Review Panel's report included the following recommendation:

If the Project is approved, the provincial Department of Health and Community Services, in consultation with Aboriginal groups, and appropriate government and community agencies from the Upper Lake Melville area, conduct a social effects needs assessment, including an appropriately resourced participatory research component, that would determine the parameters to monitor, collect baseline data, and provide recommendations for social effects mitigation measures and an approach to ongoing monitoring.<sup>2</sup>

To date, no such monitoring or mitigation has been undertaken by any level of government.

---

<sup>1</sup> The CVI Steering Committee is comprised of representatives from several community agencies and Indigenous organizations and governments, and by researchers from the University of Guelph, the Labrador Institute, and Dalhousie University. The CVI project was initiated by FemNorthNet, a research collective affiliated with the Canadian Research Institute for the Advancement of Women. For details, see <http://fnn.criaw-icref.ca/en/>.

<sup>2</sup> Joint Review Panel. 2011. Report of the Joint Review Panel - Lower Churchill Hydroelectric Generation Project. Ottawa: Minister of Environment. pp. 220.

The CVI Steering Committee aims to contribute to this monitoring work through the collaborative development and implementation of the Community Wellbeing Survey. The survey was piloted in 2017 and implemented fully in 2018. As the survey gains traction, it promises to track changes and trends in and around Happy Valley-Goose Bay.

The findings below capture data collected from mid-March to mid-May, 2018, when the survey was available online and in print, and promoted widely throughout the community. We made a concerted effort to reach residents who are often not engaged by research, such as young people and Indigenous women. The majority of our respondents were women-identified (n=127). 56% of all respondents identified as Indigenous. 28% of all respondents were less than 35 years old.

The survey contains 69 questions spanning multiple domains of community and personal wellbeing. Two questions ask specifically about the Lower Churchill hydro-electric development. They are:

1. This project includes investigating the impacts of environmental and economic change in Happy Valley-Goose Bay. A recent major change is the development of the Muskrat Falls hydro-electric dam. Since the beginning of its construction, have you noticed any changes *in the community*? Respondents who answered, “yes”, were then asked, “what have you noticed”?
2. Have you experienced any changes *in your life* that you think are related to the dam construction? Respondents who answered, “yes”, were then asked, “what have you experienced”?

86 women provided written descriptions of changes they have noticed in the community since the beginning of the development of the Lower Churchill hydroelectric project, and about 50 described changes they have experienced personally. The summary that follows offers an analysis of women’s responses. Direct quotes from survey respondents are included in text boxes. **Appendix A** includes a longer selection of responses that were provided by community members, to better illustrate dominant themes. All of the quotes included in this document represent responses from unique respondents (i.e., no one is quoted more than once).

Overall, this summary and the accompanying quotes detail the experiences and perceptions of many women in Happy Valley-Goose Bay, including many whose voices are often excluded. We hope they are of interest to interveners involved in the Inquiry.

If you have questions, please contact: Dr. Leah Levac at (519) 824-4120 x. 56065 or by email at [LLevac@uoguelph.ca](mailto:LLevac@uoguelph.ca)

## Women's Experiences of Personal and Community Change Since the Beginning of the Lower Churchill Hydroelectric Development

108 people (women, men, and people who identified as two-spirit or with none of the gender options offered) answered "yes" to the question, "...Since the beginning of [the] construction [of the Muskrat Falls hydro-electric dam], have you noticed any changes *in the community*?" 86 of these were women who subsequently provided written explanations. Five respondents noted that the project has provided new, **local employment** opportunities, and three noted that **commercial activity** has increased positively as a result of population influx, while one mentioned that population growth is good for the community. Much more frequently, population influx was viewed as problematic – causing **traffic** congestion (n=8), wear on **physical infrastructure**, and pressure on local **public healthcare services** (n=4), which respondents said have become harder to access. Some respondents also expressed that the arrival of many strangers (mostly men) is somewhat threatening both to the calm close-knit nature of the community (n=10), and to the **safety** of women (n=3).

*"I am uncomfortable with the anger and racism that comes out in many of the conversations about the project."*

Although no one who identified as Innu responded to the survey, three respondents explicitly

commented that they had witnessed an increase in **discrimination** towards Innu people because of their agreement with Nalcor. Others remarked on an increase in "discrimination" or "racism".

However, the most frequently noted observation about the project's impact was that it has led to significant increases in the general **cost of living** (n=12), in housing (n=22) and food (n=18) costs, but also extending to utilities and other goods. It was further noted by a few respondents that there is a shortage of housing supply and an increase in visible homelessness. Two respondents commented that elder residents remain displaced by flooding.

*"Overall people have become greedy. Also, the community is not growing enough to meet the demands. The land is being destroyed and people are in danger. Frustration with the project and the government. Feeling lost and angry."*

*"Greater stress and discontent among my people."*

*"...heightened tensions in community surrounding political stance on Muskrat Falls, greater volume of traffic (especially transport trucks, and especially near my house), increases in electrical bills, more racism and racist acts/speech rearing up, increased political involvement of the community as a whole."*

Another major source of **community division** was the fact that residents are polarized for and against the dam project. Additionally, there is a perception among many respondents that those who are in support of the project, or who benefit from it (in the case of landlords, for example), are motivated by financial greed.

Respondents are also experiencing, and witnessing, higher **stress** levels in general

(n=13), including as a consequence of conflict within the community. Another source of increased stress is the fact that residents are in **conflict with government** about the dam (n=8). The government (most comments did not specify the level of government) is seen by many respondents as not being representative, honest, or consultative. Several respondents expressed mistrust and/or frustration with the provincial government, as well as **fear** that the project is putting residents' lives at risk. One respondent noted that the municipal government is not adequately mitigating project impacts either.

Other sources of increased stress were repeatedly discussed by respondents including:  
 1) **present and future environmental impacts** (n=9) – most notably, flooding and contamination of the food supply; and 2) the **erosion of culture** (n=3) that results from the loss of land and community cohesion. Given the many reasons for heightened stress in the community, coupled with short-term higher income levels, it is not surprising that respondents reported that they have perceived increases in **substance use** (n=26), **violence** (n=2) and **crime** (n=12).

*“The constant stress that my Grandmother and other family members will be flooded when the dam breaks. Having to relocate because of the cost of living. Worrying about my traditional foods being poisoned.”*

60 respondents (women, men, and people who identified

*“My spouse has a good job over there and it’s the first time he has worked home in 10 years.”*

as two-spirit or with none of the options offered) said they had experienced changes in their own lives that they think are related to the dam construction, and 46 of these were women who subsequently provided explanations, including many who noted the increases in cost of living as having had a major personal effect. Two women reported positive personal benefits from access to employment. In a few cases, respondents have had to move in with family or leave the community. Nineteen said that they were seriously stressed about **environmental impacts** and **safety issues** surrounding the dam, particularly the risk of flooding. Six said that they were personally stressed by the **social and political conflict** it has created including, in some cases, division amongst friends and family members, and a noted **increase in racist speech**. Some respondents also commented about the impact on the landscape, and on their personal access to Muskrat Falls. Overall, these findings are consistent with other research showing that **resource development and extraction activities are having significant adverse effects on Northern and remote communities**. The literature identifies impacts on housing, access to health services, culture, safety, transportation and many other areas. Women, marginalized groups within the communities, and Indigenous Peoples often disproportionately experience these negative effects.<sup>3</sup>

*“I am uncomfortable with the anger and racism that comes out in many of the conversations about the project.”*

<sup>3</sup> Stienstra et al. (2016). Gendered & Intersectional Implications of Energy & Resource Extraction in Resource-Based Communities. <http://fnn.criaw-icref.ca/en/product/gba-energy-resource-extraction#.W849zy0ZNPP>

## Appendix A

### Additional responses to key survey questions<sup>4</sup>

As noted above, 86 women respondents described changes they had noticed in the community since the beginning of the Lower Churchill hydro-electric project, and about 50 described related changes in their own lives. The following quotes more fully illustrate concerns commonly addressed by respondents. We have tried to include a proportionate number of positive to negative quotes we collected. Each quote comes from a different respondent:

“FEAR of where we are living. FEAR of our river, which we feel has been turned against us. We FEAR for the future when the dam is completed and we are left with the potential catastrophe of its clay base giving way, and drowning those of us who live in what is nonchalantly being referred to as "the flood-zone"... I only pray that our little grandchildren are not with us, in harm's way, when that happens! I will not let FEAR dominate our lives, however - we will continue to live on this riverbank, and hold out some hope that our concerns around this ill-conceived project will be heard, and that measures to ensure our safety, and the safety of our children and grandchildren will be enacted. We cannot stop this terrible project, it seems, but measures that could save our lives MUST be considered, measures like the dredging of the river to allow a deeper and unimpeded flow of floodwaters or unusually thick Spring ice (2017); as well, an alarm (siren) set-up in this ill-fated flood-zone. The highly-touted telephone alarm system will not cut it! We need working sirens to give us a chance to muster to "higher ground" in the case of the dam breaching and the tsunami-like aftermath. It is the least that should be done!”

“I'm a pensioner and can't afford to pay more for goods and services.”

“The size and amount of fish has changed dramatically. Rock cods, and trout seem to be less in size and numbers.”

“Drinking water issues - the water quality has been horrible and it has caused several intestinal/digestion problems.”

---

<sup>4</sup> The two questions of focus are: This project includes investigating the impacts of environmental and economic change in Happy Valley-Goose Bay. A recent major change is the development of the Muskrat Falls hydro-electric dam. Since the beginning of its construction, have you noticed any changes *in the community*? Respondents who answered, “yes”, were then asked, “what have you noticed”? **and** Have you experienced any changes *in your life* that you think are related to the dam construction? Respondents who answered, “yes”, were then asked, “what have you experienced”?

“My home, which I own is now considered to be in a flood zone. It was not when my husband and I built it. I strongly believe that the government should have offered us financial assistance to move before the construction. What right had they to decide to put me and my home at risk without consultation or warning”?

“I feel that the transformers take away from a landscape that was initially free from much visual evidence of anthropogenic change; it makes the ‘wild’ feeling of being outdoors seem less authentic. I have felt concern for loved ones' safety in the event of dam failure because there is not adequate environmental monitoring and no flood management strategy in place. I also have felt uncomfortable / stared at while in the airport when I fly during a shift change and am one of the only females on the plane or having gone through security.”

“More expensive to eat, more housing issues, services are more difficult to access, health care is more stressed.”

“I have been able to gain a career from this project and have furthered myself in my life then I would have had the project not happened.”

“The community is divided. Blame is flung far and wide. People blame the Innu for agreeing to MF, blame the Mud Lakers for milking the system and making the Government pay for repairs that weren't caused by the MF project, the Land Protectors for dragging it on and on without any results, the colonials for making this all possible, the Town of HVGB for not taking steps to mitigate problems that have arisen from the project (rent etc.) and also the Town for not implementing an Emergency Response to potential disaster from the project.”

“The community has grown. There are a lot of transient workers that do not take time to appreciate the community or its members. With a higher income bracket due to work at Muskrat there seems to be more drug and alcohol issues in the community. Having family in Mud Lake, I see more fear for the future of the community since the flood last spring.”

“Increased traffic, astronomical food price increases, lack of some foods (i.e. never any bread in the grocery stores).”

“Many people here from away. Our health care is over-burdened. People have high incomes so there are more recreational toys on the go. Young people do not want to work at places like Tim's. Adults expect to get wages like Muskrat without working there. There is a lot more constructions. People are living in fear of the "FLOOD" that might come. Decent housing and rental prices are a thing of the past. Food prices have increased at an unacceptable level. Traffic has increased and it is very busy. There seems to be more drugs and alcohol use (look on court dockets).”



“I have noticed more negativity and hostility from community members. There seems to be more crime such as drinking and driving.”

“More people, more drugs, more discrimination, more diseases. The cost of housing has increased so dramatically, I am forced to move out of HVGB as I cannot afford it here anymore. Many young people cannot get ahead because of the cost of housing and most landlords are only open to renting to contractors at the Muskrat Falls Project.”

“I'm extremely involved in the resistance to the project. I consider myself a Land Protector. I've been charged in the Supreme Court for my role in various direct actions that we've taken against Muskrat Falls. I was charged in November of 2016 and I have been forced to go to Supreme Court off and on since then. That's over a year and a half of court dates. This means taking time off work (loss of potential income!) to ensure I am present in court. It also is extremely stressful and has been effecting my mental health. It's put a strain on many personal relationships, including friends and family who work at Muskrat Falls. Additionally, any free time I have in general is spent organizing with the grassroots resistance, so I no longer enjoy downtime or time to myself.”

“I have a good income and I still struggle to make ends meet in this community. The construction of the dam made living here too unaffordable, and the cost of electricity is expected to double because of this project. I just don't see how living here is sustainable anymore.”