

**Development of joint ventures between Indigenous communities and mining service
companies in Abitibi-Témiscamingue**

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ABSTRACT

The growing number of impact and benefit agreements (IBAs) between Indigenous communities and mining companies is increasingly leading mining service companies to develop joint ventures with Indigenous communities. However, the factors contributing to the success of these partnerships remain poorly documented. This study therefore aimed to identify the conditions that facilitate the development of joint ventures between Indigenous communities and mining service companies in Abitibi-Témiscamingue, a major mining region in Québec, Canada. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 22 members of five Indigenous communities and six employees of a drilling company, completed with a focus group involving eight participants from an Indigenous community and the drilling company. Joint ventures that are majority-owned by Indigenous partners are considered legitimate only when Indigenous partners participate meaningfully in governance, when decision-making power is shared equitably, and when capacity development within the community is supported through knowledge transfer. Partnership success also depends on taking Indigenous values and realities into account, creating culturally safe work environments, and fostering high-quality relationships between partners, which are built over several years.

Keywords: Indigenous communities; joint ventures; strategic alliances; partnerships; service enterprises

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1. Introduction

The mining industry, traditionally cyclical with periods of growth and slowdown, has been booming since the mid-2000s, and there is no indication that this trend will reverse in the near future. As gold is considered a safe-haven asset (Baur & Lucey, 2010), its price is expected to remain high in a context of global economic and political instability (Or.fr, 2026). In addition, growing demand for critical and strategic minerals is intensifying mining activity in Canada, particularly in support of the energy transition (Government of Canada, 2023). As of March 2025, the country had 56 active mines producing critical minerals, 31 processing facilities, and 171 advanced projects (Government of Canada, 2025). These activities are concentrated primarily in boreal, subarctic, and Arctic regions, where they have impacts on local communities (Béland, 2025), including Indigenous communities (Rodon & Lévesque, 2015).

Relations between the mining industry and Indigenous communities can unfold in two very different contexts in Canada, depending on whether the territory is covered by a treaty or not (Caron et al., 2019). Treaty-covered territories are those in which modern treaties or other land claims conventions or agreements have been concluded between governments and Indigenous peoples, with the effect, among other things, of redefining governance arrangements and the rules governing the use of land and natural resources. For example, northern Québec is covered by the first modern treaty concluded in Canada, the James Bay and Northern Québec Agreement (JBNQA), signed in 1975. This land claims agreement, concluded between the federal and provincial governments and the Eeyou and Inuit nations, followed the construction of hydroelectric dams that caused major and irreversible changes to Indigenous lands and ways of life (Peters, 1999; Senécal & Égré, 1999; Whiteman, 2004).

In addition to regulating natural resource development activities in Eeyou Istchee James Bay and Nunavik (Gouvernement du Québec, 2018), the agreement paved the way for the negotiation of Impact and Benefit Agreements (IBAs) between mining proponents and potentially affected Indigenous communities (Bradshaw et al., 2018; O’Faircheallaigh, 2007; Papillon & Rodon, 2017). These agreements are intended to establish the conditions

under which projects are carried out by mitigating their adverse effects and specifying the anticipated economic and social benefits, particularly through the development of economic partnerships (Knotsch et al., 2010). For Indigenous communities, they therefore constitute a mechanism through which they may influence how projects are developed on their traditional territories by engaging directly with proponents (Papillon & Rodon, 2017). The first IBA concluded in Canada was signed in 1995 and involved Inuit communities affected by the Raglan Mine in northern Québec (Nunavik) (Benoit, 2004).

In non-treaty territories, the conclusion of agreements is more recent and remains uneven across companies (Caron & Baril, 2026; Government of Canada, 2020). It is driven more by external pressures, including legal action (Rodon et al., 2022; Thériault et al., 2022), growing expectations regarding corporate social responsibility, and organizational strategies aimed at improving companies' public image (Bice, 2014; Craik et al., 2017; Prno & Slocombe, 2012). This is particularly the case in Abitibi-Témiscamingue, where a first IBA was concluded with the Abitibiwinini First Nation in 2017 in connection with the Dumont project (Pikogan, 2017), construction of which has yet to begin. Other agreements, bearing different names and containing varying provisions, have been concluded with other Anishinaabe communities since 2020 (Canadian Malartic Mine, 2020; Hecla Québec, 2020; ICI Radio-Canada, 2023, 2025a, 2025b).

The conclusion of IBAs, together with the growing integration of environmental, social, and governance (ESG) criteria into contract award processes, is affecting the activities of mining industry service providers, which numbered nearly 4,000 companies in Québec in 2022 (Association minière du Québec [AMQ], 2024). To meet the requirements of mining companies, service companies are increasingly being called upon to develop joint ventures with Indigenous communities (Canadian Council for Aboriginal Business [CCAB], 2016; Coates & Holroyd, 2022; Coates et al., 2023; Isto, 2022; Markvoort, 2022; Sternberg, 2025). While this dynamic is well established in treaty territories, where collaborative mechanisms have been in place for several decades, it is more recent in Abitibi-Témiscamingue. This gap is particularly evident in the business-to-population ratio, which

is twice as high among the Eeyouch (2.24%—498/21,065) as among the Anishinaabe (1.1%—156/14,106) (Indiana Communication, 2026).

In northern Québec, several institutional mechanisms help facilitate relations between industry and Indigenous communities. From the earliest stages of mining project development, companies seeking to explore the territory can rely on the Cree Mineral Exploration Board (CMEB), which serves as a point of entry for establishing relationships with Eeyou communities. The organization supports both companies and communities, notably by fostering entrepreneurial initiatives and facilitating access to financing (Cree Nation Government, 2010). This support is part of a broader institutional environment in which the Cree Nation Government has established various programs and tools to promote economic activity, including the Cree Social Economy Regional Table, the Cree Entrepreneur Assistance Fund, and the Regional Development Fund (Cree Nation Government, 2023). These mechanisms are complemented by the holding company Cree Regional Economic Enterprises Company (CREECO), which operates in several key sectors (CREECO, 2025), and the Secretariat to the Cree Nation–Abitibi-Témiscamingue Economic Alliance (SCNATEA), which fosters relationships with regional economic stakeholders (SCNATEA, 2026).

Conversely, Anishinaabe communities have fewer comparable mechanisms to support their economic initiatives. Some support programs are nevertheless available, including the federal government’s Strategic Partnerships Initiative (SPI). Assistance is also provided by various organizations, such as the First Nations of Québec and Labrador Economic Development Commission (FNQLEDC) at the provincial level, as well as by the economic development corporations established within each Anishinaabe community (FNQLEDC, 2023; Government of Canada, 2023; First Nations Identification [ID1N], 2026). However, the reach of these measures remains limited, and the number of Indigenous businesses in the mining services sector is still low, even though Abitibi-Témiscamingue accounts for the largest share of mining service providers in the province—more than one fifth, and more than one third when Montréal is excluded (AMQ, 2024).

Finally, the mining industry differs from Québec's forestry sector, where Indigenous businesses and partnerships with non-Indigenous partners are more firmly established (Proulx et al., 2020). These collaborations take various forms, including contractual relationships, commercial cooperation agreements, and joint ventures (Dura, 2020). Although these dynamics are less well documented in the mining sector, some recent studies have examined them (Kung et al., 2022). However, the conditions that contribute to the success of such partnerships remain poorly understood. This project addresses this gap by proposing guidelines for the development of a joint venture model between a service company and members of Indigenous communities in Abitibi-Témiscamingue. The project focuses on business partnerships more broadly, while also drawing on the case of Rouillier Drilling, a company that has already initiated discussions with at least one Anishinaabe community.

The specific objectives of the project are to:

1. Document the perceptions, needs, and interests of members of Indigenous communities in Abitibi-Témiscamingue regarding the development of partnerships with non-Indigenous mining service companies;
2. Identify the resources available to Indigenous communities in Abitibi-Témiscamingue and the approaches they use to develop business partnerships with non-Indigenous companies;
3. Document the motivations, available resources, facilitating factors, perceived challenges, and commitment of a drilling company regarding the development of partnerships with Indigenous communities.

2. Study Context

2.1. Indigenous communities

Five Indigenous communities located in Abitibi-Témiscamingue participated in this research: four Anishnaabe communities—the Abitibiwinini First Nation (Pikogan), the Lac Simon First Nation, the Long Point First Nation, and the Timiskaming First Nation, as well as one Eeyou community, the Cree Nation of Washaw Sibi.

The contemporary realities of the four Anishinaabe communities have been shaped by colonial policies of settlement, territorial dispossession, and social reorganization (Bousquet, 2016). Historically associated with Lake Abitibi, the Abitibiwinnik now reside in the community of Pikogan, which was officially granted reserve status in 1958 (Bousquet, 2016; Vincent, 1995). The Lac Simon community, located near Val-d'Or, occupies a former Anishinaabe gathering place that officially became a reserve in 1962. The Long Point community underwent several relocations during the first half of the twentieth century, notably because of flooding caused by hydroelectric dams built in the region, before settling at the present-day site of Winneway¹ in the 1950s, 72 km from Notre-Dame-du-Nord (Bousquet, 2016). Finally, Timiskaming First Nation is rooted in the historical occupation of Lake Timiskaming. The present-day community was established in 1853 under the federal Act of 1851, near Notre-Dame-du-Nord (Bousquet, 2016; Indian and Northern Affairs Canada, 1984; Vincent, 1995).

The Eeyou community of Washaw Sibi, for its part, has distinct historical, territorial, and institutional realities and was invited to participate in the study because of its presence in Abitibi-Témiscamingue. Although it has been recognized since 2003 as the tenth Eeyou community in Québec by the Grand Council of the Crees and the Cree Nation Government (Cree Nation Government, 2026), it still does not have a Category I territory (a village) or federal recognition as a distinct band (Lessard, 2015). Efforts to obtain its own territorial and political base are ongoing, notably through a proposed community near Matagami, which represents an important step in the community's territorialization process (Guindon, 2023). The Eeyouch of Washaw Sibi are therefore dispersed across several Indigenous communities in Abitibi (Pikogan), northern Québec (Waskaganish), and northeastern Ontario (Wahgoshig [Apitipi] and Moose Factory) (Lessard, 2014, 2018). Approximately half of the members live in Amos or Pikogan. The establishment of this tenth Eeyou community will allow its members to fully benefit from the James Bay and Northern Québec Agreement (JBNQA).

¹ Long Point First Nation is an Indian settlement recognized by the federal government rather than a reserve in the strict sense.

The Abitibiwiinnik of Pikogan and the Eeyouch of Washaw Sibi had a partnership agreement with Rouillier Drilling, while the other three communities had developed partnerships with other drilling companies. These communities are becoming increasingly involved in the mining development taking place on their territories, and several have signed or are negotiating IBAs with various mining companies. Each community had a distinct profile and faced challenges specific to its territorial and socioeconomic context. Some were located near an urban centre, while others were in semi-isolated areas, and several faced infrastructure constraints that limited their economic development. Labour realities also varied from one community to another: some faced a shortage of workers, while others sought to address a lack of employment opportunities on their territory.

2.2. Drilling company

Located in Abitibi-Témiscamingue, Rouillier Drilling specializes in diamond drilling services and is a subsidiary of Groupe Rouillier Inc. It currently operates in Nunavik (Raglan), northern Québec (Eeyou Istchee Baie-James) (Perron, Fénélon, and Clearwater), and Abitibi-Témiscamingue (Golder, Eldorado, and Marban) (Forages Rouillier Drilling, 2026c). The company has established three partnerships with Eeyou communities (Youdin Rouillier Drilling in Eeyou Istchee), Inuit communities (Avataa Rouillier Drilling in Nunavik), and an Anishinaabe community (Forage Anicinape in Abitibi-Témiscamingue) (Kativik Ilisarniliriniq, 2022; Sickini-Joly, 2024). Collaboration agreements have also been concluded with other Indigenous communities, including Washaw Sibi, Waskaganish, Waswanipi, and Beaverhouse First Nation (Forages Rouillier Drilling, 2026a).

Rouillier Drilling holds a UL ECOLOGO® Certification for Mineral Exploration, which attests to the application of best social, environmental, and economic practices (UL Solutions, 2026). The company has made sustained efforts to develop lasting relationships and viable economic partnerships with the Indigenous communities where it operates (Forages Rouillier Drilling, 2026b).

3. Method

3.1. Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with members of the five Indigenous communities in Abitibi-Témiscamingue, as well as with employees of Rouillier Drilling. Indigenous participants were recruited with the assistance of the Band Councils, which suggested individuals who might be interested in participating. These individuals were subsequently contacted by the research team by email or telephone. This initial recruitment was supplemented by snowball sampling, whereby participants were invited to recommend other individuals who could contribute relevant perspectives to the research (Gamborg et al., 2012). Interviews continued until no new information emerged, thereby reaching data saturation (Voynnet-Fourboul, 2012). On the drilling company's side, individual interviews were conducted between fall 2024 and winter 2026 with management employees involved in Indigenous relations.

Approval from the Research Ethics Committee of the Université du Québec en Abitibi-Témiscamingue was obtained on April 24, 2024 (2024-03_Caron, Joanie2). The participating Indigenous communities and the drilling company provided letters of support confirming their interest in and support for the project. Before each interview, participants received a detailed explanation of the information and consent form, including the conditions of participation, benefits, potential risks, possible constraints, and other ethical considerations related to the research. Informed consent was obtained through a signed consent form following this presentation. The entire research process was conducted in accordance with the ethical principles applicable to research in Indigenous contexts (Asselin & Basile, 2012, 2018; Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council [SSHRC] et al., 2022) and with the principles of OCAP® (ownership, control, access, and possession of research data in Indigenous contexts).

3.2. Focus group

In fall 2025, a focus group bringing together Indigenous participants and company representatives was held in one of the Indigenous communities participating in the project.

During the activity, participants were invited to respond to three fictional joint venture scenarios in the drilling sector involving an Indigenous community and a non-Indigenous company. The discussions highlighted participants' preferences regarding the partnership characteristics considered most conducive to the success of a joint venture, particularly in relation to trust, decision-making autonomy, and the sharing of economic benefits and expertise.

The scenarios drew on the vignette method developed from the work of Nosanchuk (1972). This method involves presenting a structured set of information describing a specific decision-making context while maintaining a degree of control over the variables involved. This approach, which is characteristic of vignette or scenario methods (Aguinis & Bradley, 2014), makes it possible to explore the reasoning processes, normative criteria, and organizational preferences brought to bear in different situations. By providing an environment that was both realistic and structured, the approach facilitated the analysis of contextual phenomena, such as partnership dynamics, while making explicit the elements considered essential to the success of a joint venture. The method also made it possible to move beyond self-reported responses by inviting participants to take a position on a range of fictional scenarios, some closely aligned with their realities and others more hypothetical.

4. Results

A total of 28 individuals participated in the interviews: 22 members of Indigenous communities and 6 representatives of the drilling company. In this report, participants are identified using a code with the following meaning: first, the group with which the person identified, Indigenous ("I") or non-Indigenous ("X"); second, sex, man ("M") or woman ("W"); and third, the letter "D" or "C," representing the drilling company or an Indigenous community, respectively. Finally, a sequential number from 1 to 28 corresponds to one of the 28 participants (Table 1). For example, an Indigenous man working for a drilling company who participated in the fourth interview would be assigned the following code: (IMD4).

All interviews were transcribed and then subjected to thematic analysis using NVivo software (Lumivero, Denver, CO). The analysis was both deductive, following the themes in the interview guide, and inductive, allowing additional themes related to partnership dynamics to emerge. Interviews conducted in French were translated into English to protect the confidentiality of participants from French-speaking Indigenous communities.

Table 1. Interview Participants by Sex and Status

	Indigenous community		Drilling company		Total
	Women	Men	Women	Men	
Anishinaabe	6	10	1	-	17
Eeyou	1	3	-	-	4
Other Indigenous identity	1	-	-	-	1
Non-Indigenous	-	1	2	3	6
Subtotal	8	14	3	3	28
Total	22		6		28

Eight individuals participated in the focus group held in one of the participating Indigenous communities: five members of one of the participating Anishinaabe communities and three members of the drilling company's management team. Participants are identified using a code composed of the following elements: the group with which the person identified, Indigenous ("I") or non-Indigenous ("X"); their sex, man ("M") or woman ("W"); and the letter "D" or "C," representing the drilling company or an Indigenous community, respectively. The letter "F" indicates participation in the focus group, followed by a sequential number from 1 to 8 corresponding to each participant (Table 2).

Table 2. Focus Group Participants by Sex and Status

	Indigenous community		Drilling company		Total
	Women	Men	Women	Men	
Anishinaabe	2	3	1	-	6
Non-Indigenous	-	-	-	2	2
Total	2	3	1	2	8

4.1. Context for the development of Indigenous–non-Indigenous partnerships in the mining sector in Abitibi-Témiscamingue

Indigenous and non-Indigenous participants noted that, in recent years, partnerships with Indigenous communities have become an increasingly important criterion when contracts

are awarded in the drilling sector in Abitibi-Témiscamingue. Whereas companies were previously able to secure contracts without formal agreements with communities, several participants explained that mining companies now place greater value on such partnerships in their selection processes. In some cases, these agreements facilitate access to the territory and legal compliance, particularly by supporting the acquisition of permits and authorizations.

It has changed things tremendously because, before, we could run [...] our business without having a partnership and without necessarily taking that into account. But now, it is really a game changer. In a given sector, if you do not have an agreement, unfortunately, it will be difficult for the mining company, even if it really likes you as a contractor, to award you the contract. It will have to go with companies that have agreements. (XMD4)

Since May [2024], junior mining companies have been required to consult us before undertaking any development on the territory [through an authorization for exploration work with impacts (*autorisation pour travaux d'exploration à impacts* - ATI)], and that is a good thing. Now, whether everyone will follow the requirement to the letter, I do not know, but we hope so. We are confident that people will do the right thing. (IMC22)

In this context, several participants explained that partnerships represent a growth opportunity for some drilling companies. They associated these collaborations with securing new contracts, expanding operations, and creating jobs.

If we do not enter into these kinds of partnerships, [...] it does not help us grow and expand as a company. These partnerships are really what will make [the drilling company] stronger and larger. (XMD6)

This new reality has intensified competition among drilling companies. Several Indigenous and non-Indigenous participants explained that pressure from mining companies encouraged some service providers to enter into agreements quickly in order to remain competitive, contributing to the proliferation of partnerships within the same community.

There is also pressure from the mining companies. [...] There was a contractor in Amos who said, "I need to find someone [from an Anishinaabe community] because I was told I would get a contract with [a mining company] if I found myself a token." [...] And it is the mining companies that say, "If you want contracts, find someone from a community [...], and you will get the contract." (IWDF7)

If you do not have an agreement, when it is time to bid, you really lose points and do not meet all the criteria. What happens with several drilling companies is that they enter into agreements with individuals from different communities, so the same community, through different individuals, may have three, four, or five agreements. (XMD4)

Most Indigenous and non-Indigenous participants criticized the emergence of superficial partnerships and fronting arrangements in which Indigenous participation remained

essentially symbolic. According to several participants, these agreements were driven more by contractual requirements than by a genuine commitment to developing equitable partnerships. In many cases, Indigenous participation was limited to a formal role, with no meaningful involvement in operations, decision-making, or the company's day-to-day activities. In this context, some participants noted that a degree of mistrust toward the mining industry sometimes persisted.

We see it with competitors. Yes, they have agreements, but when you try to look a little deeper into what is actually happening behind them, there is absolutely nothing. There are no Indigenous employees on their teams. It is more of an administrative game they are playing, whereas, in our case, concrete things are really happening on the ground. (XMD4)

Someone who simply signs and puts their name on the agreement, their role is to serve as the Indigenous face of a partnership in which the [non-Indigenous] partner handles payroll management, human resources management, everything [...]. Nominee arrangements are a major challenge in partnerships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people [...]. I might even say it's the biggest one (IMC20)

Sometimes, they just want a nominee [...]. Then they show up with their makeshift project, as though we were not going to ask questions and would sign just anything [...]. I would not say they take us for fools, but it almost feels that way. (IWC9)

Several participants noted that, despite the industry's growing interest in partnerships, implementing them remains complex because of political and intercommunity dynamics. They referred to tensions among individuals within communities and the influence of local governance dynamics, particularly frequent changes in Band Council leadership. Non-Indigenous participants also emphasized the difficulty of identifying the appropriate people with whom to develop lasting partnerships.

The infighting within communities, everyone is pulling the blanket their own way, and they talk among themselves and with people in other communities. It would be nice if they could speak with one voice [...]. I have seen situations in other communities where things became turbulent, and it affected me as well. We did not get the contract because we were not dealing with the right Tallyman. I thought I had found the formula to make it work. Then people would tell me, "Oh, you're working with him? We're not getting involved." That is the challenge: who should we be dealing with? (XMD3)

Relations among Indigenous communities were also identified as a factor influencing partnership development. Existing alliances could affect opportunities for collaboration with other communities, while overlapping territories were identified as an issue likely to become increasingly important in the future. Several participants emphasized that clear agreements among the communities concerned, particularly regarding each community's responsibilities and territories, could facilitate relations among communities, companies,

and governments in the context of natural resource development. Non-Indigenous participants also noted that the growing number of separate agreements with different communities was making the current partnership landscape more complex and pointed to the potential of more collective models that would allow economic benefits to be distributed more broadly.

We were deciding between [drilling company A] and [drilling company B], and the deciding factor in saying “no” to [drilling company A] was really that most of its partnerships were with [another Anishinaabe community]. (IWC9)

[With all the Anishinaabe communities in Abitibi-Témiscamingue], our territories overlap with everyone’s. [Our community] is right in the middle. It is not a problem yet, but before it becomes one, we need to sit down and decide how to address it. (IWC9)

In an ideal world, I was thinking that if we could have an overall agreement with all of those communities—and the same thing for all the drilling companies, if you will—and the benefits would go to all the communities, it would be so much simpler for everyone in the end. (XMD4)

4.2. Building and maintaining partnerships

4.2.1. Building trust and developing relationships

The partnerships considered the strongest were generally preceded by a lengthy period during which potential partners got to know one another in various settings, both professional and informal. For many participants, this gradual process helped build trust, gain a better understanding of how each partner operated, and progressively assess their compatibility before formalizing an agreement.

At first, it was about building a relationship of trust with [the person] who would eventually become our partner [...]. Gradually, through different events and conferences, we started meeting each other. That is how we built trust. (XMD4)

[The owner of the drilling company] is also socially involved in various activities. I accompanied him to the powwow [of an Anishinaabe community]. He knew people and greeted them [...]. Taking part in the golf tournament creates opportunities for exchanges, networking, and making connections. It shows: “I’m here, and I’m taking the time to come see you.” (IWD2)

The trust comes from the time we spent together. [...] It still took a long time. They already had partnerships; they did not come running to us at the last minute saying, “Hey, we need an Indigenous person!” We have been doing this for seven or eight years. (IWC8)

In some cases, involvement also took the form of supporting community initiatives unrelated to the company's business activities, which strengthened the non-Indigenous company's credibility within the communities.

We had someone from [an Anishinaabe community] who travelled by Skidoo [as part of the First Nations Expedition]. We followed the initiative and supported him with communications and advertising, and we also provided financial support [...], while contributing time, not just money. I think that is what makes the difference. (XWD5)

Before establishing a joint venture, several organizations first favoured less binding forms of collaboration, including employee leasing agreements. This approach allowed them to test the business relationship, assess whether their respective visions were aligned, and determine their organizational compatibility before formalizing a more structured partnership.

It is about getting to know each other first [...]. It means using an employee leasing arrangement [to] see whether we are a good fit and whether we share the same vision [...]. I have been working with [an industrial services company] for six or seven years now [...]. We know that, when the time comes, we will create our company. (IMC13)

We have known each other for a long time! I'm not joking [...] and the marriage was something we thought through carefully. We have been working on it for a long time [...]. I would say we flirted a little. We even jumped the fence a couple of times! (IMCF1)

4.2.2. Understanding Indigenous realities and respecting communities

Several participants emphasized the importance of companies developing a sound understanding of the social, cultural, and organizational realities of Indigenous communities before initiating partnership discussions. In their view, training on Indigenous realities helps foster this understanding while encouraging more open dialogue and reducing certain stereotypes and misunderstandings.

Because when you commit to working with an Indigenous group, you also commit to learning about the culture and the history in order to truly break down stereotypes [...]. This requires training everyone, from the company's management employees all the way down the organizational chart. (IMC18)

Several Indigenous participants emphasized the importance of non-Indigenous companies respecting communities' own decision-making processes when developing partnerships. Decisions involving communities often require internal consultation and may proceed at a different pace than some companies are accustomed to. Several participants therefore stressed the importance of patience and openness in fostering lasting relationships.

Listening to their needs and realities [...]. There were some frustrations at the beginning because, as I said, the process was very long, but it was important to respect the community's internal decision-making process [...]. It is about being open-minded; sometimes, the realities are different. (IWC9)

Non-Indigenous participants acknowledged that it could sometimes be difficult to find an appropriate pace for developing relationships with communities, as some companies feared moving either too slowly or, conversely, too quickly in their partnership efforts. Some participants also mentioned that many companies were unfamiliar with how Indigenous communities operate and with the appropriate ways of establishing relationships with them.

Some are used to working with communities; you do not have to explain what a Band Council or a community is. Others know absolutely nothing; they only came to see us because [...] the mining company told them to. [They do not know] how things work [...]. They do not want to be awkward or disrespectful [...], and they do not know who to speak with. (IWC16)

Partnerships developed too quickly, as well as initiatives undertaken without a genuine understanding of Indigenous realities, were associated with negative experiences. A lack of knowledge of communities' social, cultural, and organizational realities could lead to misunderstandings, complicate the development of trust, and increase the risk of incompatibility between partners. Several participants felt that some initiatives were motivated primarily by short-term business considerations.

Those who want an agreement right away and are in a hurry have not understood anything. (XMDF2)

Companies approaching First Nations should first do their homework and learn about the community, its members, how people make a living, and the Nation's values before even reaching out to us. Sometimes, when they come to us without that knowledge or approach, it pushes us away because we cannot see how a transparent relationship could develop. (IMC8)

4.2.3. Communication, transparency, and loyalty

Several participants emphasized that the long-term viability of a partnership also depended largely on the quality of communication among the various parties involved. In their view, legal agreements primarily govern the formal aspects of a partnership, but rarely define how day-to-day operations should be managed or how partners should work together on a daily basis. It was therefore considered essential to establish clear communication mechanisms from the outset to clarify mutual expectations, prevent misunderstandings, and ensure better coordination among partners.

Not everything is necessarily defined, because a business contract or partnership agreement does not specify how the company will operate; it only defines the agreement between the two partners. How will the benefits be shared? How will conflicts be resolved? (IMC15)

Several participants emphasized that communication needed to be ongoing and proactive. A lack of regular follow-up could weaken partnerships and create frustration among the parties involved.

I would say that what is missing is communication and follow-up. I have seen [partnerships] where the partners were not even speaking to each other. And we were sitting there in front of them, thinking, “Would you like a moment to talk to each other?” I felt uncomfortable and thought, “Wow, they do not even talk to each other.” (IWC16)

I expect the company to treat the community as a business partner, not as a subordinate or a burden it is forced to carry. I do not expect to have to ask after six months [...], “Where are we at with the people we trained? Have they become helpers yet? When are we hiring the next group? When are we doing this or that?” I expect them [the non-Indigenous company] to be proactive. (XMC11)

In some cases, communication was facilitated by individuals who acted as intermediaries between the non-Indigenous company, the joint venture, and the community. These individuals helped ensure a continuous flow of information among the various organizations involved. Several participants emphasized the importance of maintaining close contact between management and employees to foster open dialogue and resolve problems in the field quickly. Others noted that communication should allow each partner to fully assume its role in the relationship and promote a better understanding of each other’s realities.

We go see people directly in their workplace and talk with them [...]. That is our business model: we stay close to our employees. No one is just a number; we know them by name. That is how we operate, and that is how we build relationships. (XMD4)

The challenge is always communication [...]. Senior leaders and managers really need to take their role seriously [...] and both entities need to learn to understand each other’s reality. In a partnership, the needs on both sides really have to be met. (XMD6)

Finally, several participants also emphasized the importance of loyalty in maintaining business relationships. Once a partnership had been established, avoiding behaviour perceived as opportunistic helped preserve long-term trust between the parties.

We do have the opportunity to do it [enter into a partnership with a second drilling company], but at the same time, my very personal opinion, which was not necessarily shared by everyone, is that it is a little insulting to your partner. Instead of trying to secure more contracts with them, you are sort of managing both relationships [...]. I felt it was a little, not exactly

backstabbing, but close to it. I do not see how you can maintain a good business relationship with your partner if you start [looking elsewhere]. (IWC9)

4.2.4. Respect for Indigenous values and the land

Most Indigenous participants emphasized that joint ventures must reflect the values and cultural realities of the communities. From this perspective, several stressed the importance of upholding and conveying these values within business relationships.

It is really about giving the company an Indigenous identity and character, and creating an entrepreneurial spirit and an organizational culture shaped by Indigenous values. At least, that is what we hope to achieve. (IWD2)

You can tell when someone is doing it only for the money. That person will not stand up for you in front of others [...]. Someone who genuinely cares about the values will not care about the money or about losing a contract. (IWC16)

Several participants also discussed the importance of family and intergenerational values in workplace relationships and in the organizational culture of joint ventures. Some drew parallels between the family-oriented culture of certain non-Indigenous companies and the importance placed on family, knowledge transmission, and intergenerational learning within Indigenous communities. This alignment between certain organizational and Indigenous values appeared to facilitate relationship building and the maintenance of partnerships.

Respect for the land was central to participants' accounts. Several participants emphasized the importance of recognizing communities' concerns regarding water, wildlife, flora, and ecosystems. Some participants also mentioned the need to better understand Indigenous perspectives on the land, which can sometimes conflict with approaches centred on natural resource development, in order to reconcile these differing views when developing partnerships. From this perspective, dialogue, recognition of the values of Indigenous communities, and the establishment of clear expectations among partners appeared to be important conditions for maintaining lasting partnership relationships.

I think it is about recognizing and respecting Indigenous communities. Mineral exploration, anything involving the development of the land, is very sensitive: water, nature, and wildlife. It is important to know a company is ECOLOGO certified and is mindful that Anishinaabe, Cree, or other Nations are present on the land. Before going there, we want to make sure the community is aware of it and agrees to it. (IWD2)

As long as the willingness and respect are there, so that we can maintain our spiritual and cultural practices, and as long as the company is also committed to environmental protection, to respecting wildlife and flora, and to restoring the sites once the project is completed. (IMC22)

When someone wants to exploit a resource as a source of income and a way to line their pockets, Indigenous people see that resource as part of a continuum that should be passed on from one generation to the next. So, of course, there is an incredible clash between those two perspectives. It is time to reconcile them. (XMC11)

4.3. Forms and governance of partnership businesses

4.3.1. Forms Indigenous businesses

Indigenous participants' comments showed that there is no single preferred business structure for developing Indigenous–non-Indigenous partnerships in the mining sector in Abitibi-Témiscamingue. Preferences varied according to community contexts, past experiences, and economic development objectives. Some participants favoured businesses collectively owned by the community, particularly through economic development corporations (EDCs), while others preferred private entrepreneurship or cooperative models. However, the vast majority of participants emphasized the importance, regardless of the business structure selected, of including a mechanism to redistribute a portion of the profits to the community.

For many participants, community-owned businesses were viewed as a particularly attractive model because they allowed a portion of the profits generated through partnerships to be redistributed throughout the community rather than benefiting only a small number of individuals. Some participants also valued the cooperative model, particularly because of the transparency it could provide in business operations and its perceived alignment with certain Indigenous community values.

I think a business owned by the Band Council is always the best option. However, it has to operate through a corporation because a Band Council cannot generate profits directly. So, a separate corporation must be created, and, you know, it is not simple. You need lawyers, a corporation, and a board of directors. So, it still creates certain challenges. (IMC27)

Several participants nevertheless expressed reservations about community-owned businesses, particularly because of the risk of political interference. Some felt that EDCs sometimes played too prominent a role in local economic development, limiting the

emergence of independent Indigenous entrepreneurs and creating competition with businesses owned by community members. Several participants expressed a desire to see more space given to private entrepreneurship, particularly in communities where an entrepreneurial base was beginning to develop. In their view, EDCs therefore play an important role in initiating and supporting economic development, but their role should evolve as local entrepreneurship becomes more firmly established, allowing more entrepreneurs from the community to take over.

When there is competition between businesses owned by the community and those owned by individual Indigenous entrepreneurs [...]. I have never supported, over the long term, having the Band Council, through its corporation, own all the businesses [...]. It is good at the beginning, when we are just getting started, to establish those businesses, but in the future, in 10, 15, or 20 years, we need to make room for young entrepreneurs to take on that responsibility. (IMC20)

If a business wants to develop in the drilling sector, it automatically becomes a competitor of [the EDC-owned company] [...]. The EDC, which is there to support businesses, cannot help [the new company] because you cannot work against your own interests. It would be sabotage. (IMCF1)

There are always projects being planned, but what I find unfortunate is that there are no entrepreneurs or project proponents in our community. It is always the [EDC] that supports the projects. (IMC23)

Concerns related to the community-owned business model also led many participants to emphasize the importance of maintaining a degree of separation between businesses and the political bodies of Indigenous communities. Frequent changes within Band Councils were perceived as a potential source of instability that could influence the economic direction of businesses. In this context, several participants stressed the importance of establishing organizational structures with sufficient decision-making autonomy to limit political interference and ensure greater stability in the management of partnerships.

It involves a lot of conflict. Politics changes every three or four years; sometimes things go well, and sometimes they do not. (IMC15)

[The community] appoints the board members of [the EDC], but otherwise [the joint venture] has decision-making autonomy through its board [...]. [This is] intended to limit [...] political influence. (IWC9)

4.3.2. Joint venture 51/49

Beyond the preferred legal structure, whether a business owned by the Band Council, an EDC, a cooperative, or a private company, representatives of the drilling company and

Indigenous participants were largely in favour of joint venture models based on a 51/49 ownership structure, in which the Indigenous partner held the majority of the shares. For most of the community members interviewed, the 51% threshold was a non-negotiable condition of partnership, as it helped ensure legitimate participation and a degree of control over the joint venture's direction.

Despite this general consensus, several participants noted that 51% ownership does not guarantee genuine control, as some situations revealed a gap between the formal ownership structure and the practices observed on the ground. For many, majority ownership was therefore only a starting point and needed to be accompanied by mechanisms ensuring that businesses recognized as Indigenous genuinely represented community interests. In some communities, this concern had led to the establishment of formal mechanisms intended to limit the use of nominee companies and regulate access to economic opportunities negotiated by the communities. Recognition was based on evidence of the Indigenous partner's meaningful involvement in the business, compliance with criteria established by certain communities, and, in some cases, registration in an official registry of recognized businesses.

There are four criteria [for a joint venture to be considered legitimate from an Indigenous perspective]. Fifty-one percent of the shares must be owned by a community member [...], he [the Indigenous entrepreneur] must have invested [at least] one third [start-up capital] of the ownership share in the company, the majority of the people working there must be community members, and [that the] head office [be located in the community]. Once these criteria are met, the company is recognized and [...] must remain compliant. Otherwise, we terminate the agreement with that company [...], and it no longer has access to the benefits provided through our IBAs. (IMC14)

4.3.3. Board of directors

Participants expressed two preferences regarding the composition of joint venture boards of directors. In both cases, they emphasized the importance of balancing operational expertise, decision-making equity, and efficiency in the decision-making process. Several participants favoured relatively simple structures with a limited number of members, particularly in small communities where the number of people available to serve on a board may be limited. Some also felt that the composition of the board should reflect the ownership structure of the joint venture, thereby giving the Indigenous partner a decision-making majority.

The board should consist of either three or five members. The general manager [of the joint venture] should be the general manager of the [non-Indigenous] company that has the expertise. The board should have a majority of members [representing the Indigenous partner], since the ownership structure is 51/49. It will therefore also have a decision-making majority, either two to one or three to two. That is how it will be structured. (IMC15)

This preference was nevertheless qualified by concerns regarding the operational capacity and level of expertise of some Indigenous partners. Proportional representation could raise concerns for the non-Indigenous partner, particularly when it believed that it contributed a greater share of the technical or operational expertise.

[In our partnership, the drilling company] strongly preferred a one-to-one arrangement. Initially, we might have preferred two to one [...], with two community representatives for one company representative, since we held 51%. But I understood their reluctance because we knew nothing about the mining sector [...]. If we overturned a decision and it made no sense from an operational standpoint... I could understand their reservations, so in the end, we agreed on a one-to-one arrangement. (IWC9)

In this context, some partnerships instead favoured equal representation, which was seen as a compromise that supported collaboration and mutual trust. For several participants, this model represented a strong symbol of reciprocal commitment between the partners.

Do minority governments work well? Sometimes, I think they work even better because there is more negotiation and discussion, rather than decisions being made directly between parties. I think things work better that way [...]. I think that when we present our projects clearly and they make sense, [...] they are approved. (XMDF3)

When I think about it, I find that the 2:2 model is a good one. It demonstrates the commitment of both parties and shows that they want to work together. You do not usually see that, a board with an even number of members. This is the first time I have seen a board of directors structured 2:2. (IWDF7)

This model was nevertheless recognized as carrying a risk of decision-making deadlock. Some participants mentioned the possibility of establishing formal dispute resolution mechanisms, such as giving one of the partners the power to veto certain decisions. Despite this, several indicated that they preferred consensus-based approaches in order to preserve trust between the partners.

4.3.4. Head office

Indigenous participants emphasized the importance of locating the joint venture's head office in the community. This preference was notably related to the tax rules applicable to

individuals registered under the Indian Act who live on a reserve. Eligibility for the tax exemption is based on various connecting factors, such as place of residence, place of employment, and the location of the employer. However, several participants qualified the importance of this location by noting that certain contextual constraints, such as a lack of available infrastructure or local regulations restricting the establishment of businesses in the community, could make it necessary to locate the head office outside the community.

As for a joint venture located outside the community, that can also depend on the context, because there may not be any space available in the community [...]. And even within the community, just because you have a house [in an Anishinaabe community] does not mean you can operate a business from it. We also have regulations in the community. It may simply be contextual. It is neither positive nor negative; it may just depend on the context. (IMCF1)

It is better to have the head office in the community. Having it in the community is advantageous for employees from the community [...]. We do not like it being located outside the community. (IMC23)

Some participants nevertheless specified that these tax benefits did not apply to legal entities such as corporations², which remained subject to the general tax system even when owned and operated by First Nations members on a reserve. Beyond tax considerations, several participants viewed locating the head office in the community as a way to improve access to employment and foster a stronger sense of belonging among community members.

4.3.5. Collective benefits and redistribution

Indigenous participants described joint ventures as a means of generating local economic benefits, particularly through employment, training, and own-source revenue for communities. For many, these partnerships represented a way to reduce dependence on government funding and address broader socioeconomic needs, including housing, training, and economic development. Several participants also emphasized the importance of being regarded as genuine partners in projects carried out on their territories and expressed growing weariness with the limited benefits generated by these projects.

You always have to keep in mind that you are on our traditional territory. We are not against these companies. We are not against progress or anything like that. What we want is to be

² Unlike registered individuals or Indigenous governments, corporations and cooperatives are separate legal entities that generally do not benefit from the tax exemptions provided under the Indian Act. Although a corporation wholly owned by an Indigenous government may be tax-exempt, this exemption remains largely limited to income generated on a reserve (Bryan, 2024).

involved. As I have said before, we are tired of receiving crumbs. We want our share of the opportunities, the economic development opportunities. That is what we want. (IMC7)

Several participants also discussed mechanisms for redistributing a portion of the economic benefits throughout the community. In the absence of taxation powers comparable to those of municipalities, some communities negotiated various forms of financial contributions to ensure that the benefits generated by partnerships extended beyond the individuals directly involved in the joint venture. These mechanisms could include royalties, percentages tied to contracts obtained, or contributions to community funds intended to support various local initiatives.

Of course, we want to have some say in what happens as development moves forward. We want some oversight, but also access to royalties, training, and employment opportunities. We do not want to be given a small token benefit and then pushed aside. If we enter a partnership, we want something meaningful from it. (IMC22)

When a non-Indigenous company comes into the community and is awarded a contract, out of respect for the community [...], it should ensure that the contract generates economic benefits for the community, such as a percentage of the contract. (IWC24)

There is a model used [...] in several communities [...], involving [a royalty for each] metre drilled. It is a model that seems to satisfy all three parties. In the end, that is what we want: to provide opportunities and, on the other side, to provide some return for activities carried out on the territory. (IMCF4)

Participants nevertheless acknowledged that it was not always easy to determine what constituted sufficient benefits for the community as a whole. Several emphasized the difficulty of striking a balance between the benefits generated for the direct partners and those redistributed more broadly throughout the community. On the drilling company's side, some participants also highlighted the challenges associated with broader benefit redistribution and the importance of managing expectations to avoid making unrealistic promises.

[One of the challenges] is that our partners are individuals, but despite that, we still try to generate broader benefits for the communities themselves. That is a significant challenge. (XMD4)

It is about finding the balance between what is considered "giving enough to the community" and what is considered "a minimal benefit for the community." (IMC18)

We do not want to create too many expectations. We do not put a figure on the table either. We keep things somewhat open so as not to create false expectations. (XMD4)

4.4. *Financing and infrastructure*

Access to capital was identified as an important condition for the development of Indigenous businesses and partnerships with non-Indigenous companies in the mining sector. Several Indigenous participants emphasized that the limited availability of capital in some communities restricts their ability to invest in new business ventures. This constraint is sometimes compounded by the inability to use assets located on a reserve³ as collateral, making it more difficult to obtain financing. As a result, in some communities, the Band Council or the EDC may need to provide financial support for certain projects, although the level of support may vary.

It is difficult because community members do not have access to capital [...]. The [economic development] corporation or the Band Council has to provide financial backing. [But] the Council is not very supportive of backing economic development projects. (IMC23)

Economic realities varied from one community to another. Some had more developed economic tools and resources, while others remained at earlier stages of economic development.

At the moment, I do not think [our community] has access to that kind of financing [...]. But yes, in the future, I think it would be a very good thing. (IWC19)

Beyond access to capital, participants also discussed how the initial investment should be divided when establishing a joint venture. Several expressed reservations about a model in which the non-Indigenous company would provide all of the start-up capital, arguing that such an arrangement could limit the Indigenous partner's economic autonomy from the earliest stages of the partnership. Several participants instead emphasized the importance of the Indigenous partner contributing financially or in other ways to demonstrate its commitment to the project and promote a more balanced sharing of responsibilities.

Most participants who were already involved in a partnership indicated that the non-Indigenous company was primarily responsible for administrative and financial management, particularly during the early stages of the partnership, while maintaining a certain level of transparency with the Indigenous partner. Some Indigenous participants

³ Section 89 of the *Indian Act* provides that “the real and personal property of an Indian or a band situated on a reserve is not subject to charge, pledge, mortgage, attachment, levy, seizure, distress or execution in favour or at the instance of any person other than an Indian or a band” (Indian Act, 1985, s. 89). In practice, this provision limits the ability of financial institutions to seize property located in Indigenous communities, often making them reluctant to finance assets located on reserves (Callihoo & Bruno, 2016; CCAB, 2016).

indicated that they were satisfied with this division of responsibilities and did not wish to assume these tasks in the short term, particularly because of the specialized skills they required.

So far, [the non-Indigenous company] has managed pretty much everything on the financial side. We handle all the administration and management [...], and then, of course, we provide all the necessary supporting documents, including all the financial statements. (XMD3)

Among participants involved in existing partnerships, day-to-day operations were also managed primarily by the non-Indigenous company, while major decisions were discussed by the partners through the board of directors. Decisions that fell outside routine operations or the established budget were generally discussed between the partners.

The operating company takes care of all the day-to-day decisions. When decisions involve matters outside the budget or issues that were not decided by the board of directors, we discuss them together. (XMD3)

That said, several Indigenous participants expressed a desire not to remain indefinitely in a position of financial and administrative dependence.

While non-Indigenous partners generally contribute technical and financial expertise, several participants emphasized that communities also make significant contributions to partnerships, particularly by facilitating access to the territory, social acceptability, and economic development opportunities. Some felt that these contributions were still undervalued in negotiations, which sometimes limited communities' ability to develop sustainable projects.

If the non-Indigenous drilling company were to provide 100% of the initial capital, I would also question that [...]. If [...] the drilling company provides all the equipment, I do not think that is right. We want [...] our members to be proud to operate a machine that belongs to the [joint venture]. (IWC16)

It is also the responsibility of the Indigenous entrepreneur to demonstrate a certain level of commitment to the business. If you want to share that responsibility, you need to show that you care as much about [the joint venture's success] as the company with which you are affiliated. (IMCF4)

They need us as much as we need them [...]. They forget the value of what we bring to the table. It may not be material or financial, but we bring the social acceptability that opens doors. (IMC8)

Participants also emphasized that access to capital alone is insufficient when the infrastructure needed for business development is lacking. In several communities, the shortage of commercial or industrial space limits the creation and growth of local businesses. Several participants mentioned the lack of administrative offices, storage facilities, garages, or serviced land suitable for economic activities. In some cases, businesses operate out of private residences or facilities located outside the communities.

Obviously, in our community, developing the industrial park is becoming essential in the short term. [...]. We have four or five construction companies, and we are going to need garages, industrial yards, and business offices. [Economic] development in the community is somewhat disorganized right now, with businesses operating from residential addresses. (IMC15)

There is a serious shortage of commercial space in the community. We rent space in town. (IWC17)

Despite these constraints, several participants mentioned the existence of various support mechanisms that facilitated the development of Indigenous partnerships and businesses. Federal government programs, such as Canada Economic Development and Indigenous Services Canada, as well as provincial programs, such as the Indigenous Initiatives Fund IV, were used to support business start-ups, equipment purchases, workforce training, and business expansion. Participants also mentioned the role of Indigenous economic development organizations, certain financial institutions, and funds dedicated to Indigenous entrepreneurship, such as the Native Commercial Credit Corporation. The importance of the assistance provided by some organizations in securing financing and developing business plans was also emphasized. However, several participants noted that access to funding varied according to the type of need. While some programs facilitated equipment purchases or business start-ups, funding for workforce training appeared to be more difficult to obtain or implement.

With Canada Economic Development and the Indigenous Initiatives Fund, we are able to secure funding through different levels of government. (XMC11)

We [an EDC] provide support for business start-ups, acquisitions, and expansions, as well as assistance with securing financing and developing business plans [...]. We also offer information sessions with all the organizations that provide funding. (IWC16)

Microloans of \$5,000 are intended to help start a business. Sometimes, only a small amount is needed to incorporate or cover similar expenses. But before we can financially support businesses, we will need to be in a strong financial position ourselves. (IWC17)

Federal funding is fairly accessible for building wealth within businesses, purchasing drilling rigs, and other related needs. That is very positive. Where we have more difficulty is with

training. It is not that simple. We are told that funding is available, but it is not so easy to put in place. (XMD3)

4.5. Indigenous workforce

4.5.1. Hiring and job attractiveness

Indigenous and non-Indigenous participants widely emphasized that hiring Indigenous workers was one of the main expected benefits of partnerships in the drilling sector. Since exploration activities take place on their traditional territories, participants considered it essential that the jobs created primarily benefit local communities. Some also criticized the use of workers from outside the region, and sometimes even from abroad, despite the significant need for employment within the communities. Partnerships were also viewed as a means of supporting local economic development, particularly in communities where economic benefits remained limited. In addition to hiring, partnerships could encourage the purchase of goods, services, and equipment from local suppliers or suppliers located near the communities.

Right now, when our members graduate, they rarely come back here because there are no jobs. That is what we want to change. That is how we will grow. (IMC7)

From the companies' perspective, local hiring was also seen as a way to reduce reliance on international recruitment or on workers from outside the region.

So far, the main benefit has been the [Indigenous] workforce. We see many companies in the surrounding area, in other sectors, bringing in workers from Mauritania or the Philippines, but we have Indigenous employees. Indigenous workers make up 10% of our workforce. (XMD3)

Some participants also mentioned the importance of including hiring targets for community members in agreements to maintain this objective, while acknowledging that meeting these targets remained dependent on the actual availability of workers.

I think it is important to establish a target number of employees within the company [...]. It is simply a target intended to encourage the company to work toward local hiring. (IMCF4)

Despite the importance placed on hiring Indigenous workers, several participants emphasized that this objective faced various constraints. In some communities, the small population base limited the number of candidates available to work in new joint ventures.

These challenges were also part of a broader labour shortage in Abitibi-Témiscamingue, where strong demand across different sectors increased competition among employers.

We have a small population base, and we have so many projects. It is overwhelming! There simply are not enough of us. People often want workers, but none are available: everyone is either working or in school. That is the reality. It is a good thing that all our people are working. (IWC16)

There has been something of a joint venture boom in the community [...]. Soon, [for future projects], finding workers will be a major challenge. So, we are trying to equip ourselves as well as possible to support them with that. (IWC17)

There is a labour shortage. If you manage to hire a few First Nations members, it is because you need them. It is not because you are doing the community a favour or fulfilling a consultation obligation. It is because there is a shortage of workers everywhere. (IMC27)

This constraint is compounded by the specific demands of drilling work. Several participants noted that difficult working conditions, travel requirements, and rotational schedules can create barriers for some individuals and limit recruitment.

Of course, we are not going to hire the entire community. Not everyone wants to do that kind of work either [...]. It is not an easy job. Sometimes, you have to fly out by helicopter for a work rotation, work in temperatures of -40°C in winter conditions, or in temperatures of +50°C inside the drill when it is hot in the summer. These are not easy working conditions. (XWD5)

Some participants also mentioned that mobilizing the local workforce can be challenging in certain communities, despite the availability of employment opportunities. According to participants, companies and communities need to make efforts to promote these jobs and encourage community members to enter this sector.

We need to do a lot of work to motivate people and let them know that they do not need extensive formal education to get started and secure a good job. (IMC22)

However, several community members explained that the Indigenous component of joint ventures made these jobs more attractive. In their view, the opportunity to work for an organization connected to their community, contribute to its economic development, and work in an environment perceived as more culturally safe helped attract and retain some employees. Participants also noted that mining-sector jobs were associated with a sense of pride because they were valued and well paid.

Most of our members want to work in their community, or they want to work for a company where they feel their identity is represented. (IMC20)

It gives you the opportunity to get out and see something new [...]. There is also a sense of pride associated with it. You are going to work at the mine, and you have a good salary [...]. I have heard that a lot from my workers. (IMC13)

Because it is Indigenous, they are more inclined to go [...]. It is not easy for an Indigenous person to enter a White work environment. (IWC17)

4.5.2. Liaison, recruitment, workforce entry, and retention

Several participants explained that priority hiring of community members was generally not governed by formal contractual obligations. Instead, it relied on informal practices incorporated into regular recruitment processes, often depending on collaboration between key individuals within companies and communities.

I do not think there is necessarily any preferential hiring either. We do not say, “Hey, we absolutely have to hire a certain number of Indigenous people.” We assess them in the same way as anyone else. If they seem like a good fit, they are a good fit. There is no pressure to hire them. (XMDF2)

Many participants emphasized the value of a structured hiring process for Indigenous applicants, based on close collaboration between human resources staff and Indigenous personnel already established in the communities or on the territory, particularly through a liaison officer. In their view, this relationship facilitates the identification of potential candidates, strengthens ties with communities, and supports better communication between the parties. Some participants also noted that this mechanism helps address past practices in which Indigenous applicants were assessed by selection committees with no Indigenous representation.

Staff also need to believe in hiring Indigenous employees. I will not hide the fact that it was a little difficult at first, but now it is going very well. The process is smooth and has become automatic [...]. It requires good collaboration with the HR department [...]. As soon as they receive a résumé from an Indigenous applicant, we review it together and discuss it. [...] I take part in the HR meetings every week, including the workforce meeting where we discuss staffing needs and positions to be filled. When I have promising résumés from Indigenous candidates, I put them forward, and they are often selected for an interview. (IWDF7)

The liaison officer also helps support the workforce entry and continued employment of Indigenous workers within drilling companies. This role extends beyond administrative duties. In particular, the liaison officer supports human resources and provides follow-up and assistance to Indigenous employees facing personal, family, or workplace difficulties. Some participants also mentioned that this person can act as an intermediary between

Indigenous employees and supervisors when certain cultural or family realities are not fully understood within the framework of organizational policies.

She raises awareness of Indigenous realities. Gradually, all the supervisors we have on the projects have become more open-minded than they were before. Everyone understands their realities a little better. There is greater acceptance now. Things have changed a lot, so the retention rate is much higher than it was in the early days, that is for sure. (XMD4)

When an employee is dealing with family difficulties [...], I am also there to act as an intermediary between the superintendent and the employee [...]. The concept of family in an Indigenous context may be understood differently than in a non-Indigenous context. Several dismissals have been avoided because of that. (IWD2)

In human resources, it is important to have someone from our community. Communication and understanding are easier because we know our people and understand their realities. Often, when it is someone from outside the community, they tend to be more by the book. (IWC24)

In terms of personnel management, the company should have a liaison or follow-up officer, or something along those lines, who can really follow up with employees. I think that would be very effective. I know that a few joint ventures are already doing this, and it is an approach that works. (IMC18)

Participants' accounts also highlighted the flexible and evolving nature of the liaison officer's role. Several emphasized that this role cannot be limited to a rigid job description and requires a strong capacity to adapt to the concrete needs of employees and communities. In their view, this flexibility also requires sufficient time, resources, and clear support from the non-Indigenous partner.

[That] means that, yes, the role requires time and effort outside regular working hours because drilling is not a nine-to-five office job from Monday to Friday. I think this [liaison officer] position should be essential in many companies. (IWDF7)

The person in this [liaison officer] position also needs a great deal of flexibility. It cannot be someone rigid who looks at their job description and says, "No, that is not my responsibility." You put the job description aside and do what needs to be done to retain your workforce and support recruitment. (IMCF1)

4.5.3. Training

For most Indigenous and non-Indigenous participants, training was a central component of partnerships. They emphasized the importance of developing structured, paid, workplace-based training programs to support the workforce entry of Indigenous people into the drilling sector.

They need to know our work methods, that we are going to hire Indigenous people and train Indigenous people from your community. [...] We would love to have an all-Indigenous cohort. That would be really amazing. (IWD2)

Several participants described a gradual progression model that allows individuals with no prior experience to learn the trade on the job, notably by starting in entry-level positions before gradually moving into more specialized roles.

We have an in-house program [...] that allows people with absolutely no experience to learn the trade [...]. We train and coach them, and then they become drill helpers or drillers. (XMD4)

Although workplace-based training was valued, several participants emphasized that it was also desirable to offer training within the communities. Some training opportunities were difficult to access when they were offered only outside the communities or only in French, which is a second language in some communities.

It would be great to be able to train them here in our community. We do not have the resources for that, so we send them to Rouyn for training [...], but we would prefer to bring the trainers here. (IMC27)

[In our community], that is a problem because, first, the training is offered in French, and second, you have to move to Val-d'Or to take it. (XMC11)

Participants also highlighted that the presence of Indigenous trainers supports persistence, strengthens the sense of belonging, and helps create culturally safe training environments.

[We] pair the non-Indigenous trainer with an Indigenous drill helper, and that makes all the difference. (IWD2)

Having a trainer from our community is a source of pride. Today, [a community member] feels valued because of it. He talks to me about it, and he is happy and proud too. (IWCF8)

4.5.4. Workplace relations

Participants' accounts highlighted the importance of developing cultural competencies within organizations to foster more inclusive and culturally safe work environments. Several participants noted that certain misunderstandings or missteps stem more from a lack of knowledge of Indigenous realities than from any explicit intent to cause harm. Participants also reported that some non-Indigenous employees sometimes fear being awkward or appearing disrespectful in their interactions with Indigenous employees.

Personally, I feel like I am walking on eggshells. The better you get to know them and the more tools you have, such as those provided by [the liaison officer] through the Indigenous coffee sessions, the better it is. They will understand that, wow, people have made an effort to understand our culture, but it is still a challenge. (XWD1)

Some participants also emphasized the importance of developing greater mutual understanding between Indigenous and non-Indigenous employees in order to foster more harmonious workplace relationships. In their view, partnership development depends in part on the ability of the different parties to learn from one another and better understand each other's ways of working.

There are human relationships that need to be worked on [...]. There will always be advantages and disadvantages, whether it is an Indigenous or non-Indigenous company [...]. But I think that, in 2025, we can all learn from one another, learn to work together, and learn about each other's cultures. (IWC19)

However, some misunderstandings were part of more problematic dynamics. Several participants reported persistent prejudice and discriminatory behaviour in certain workplaces. Indigenous participants referred in particular to inappropriate comments, negative generalizations, and situations in which remarks considered offensive or discriminatory created significant workplace tensions.

The comments I have received include, "Okay, you work, so you are not like the others." What does "not like the others" mean? That the others do not work? Those kinds of stereotypes. (IMC18)

For example, this summer, the foreman made a joke about Indigenous people, and the woman got into her car at lunch and left. She called me and said, "He made a joke about me, and I did not find it funny." [I told her], "We are going to talk about it. You do not have to leave." (IMC26)

From this perspective, several participants mentioned the importance of implementing organizational policies that foster a respectful and inclusive work environment. These policies notably addressed harassment prevention, anti-racism, respect for cultural differences, and complaint-handling mechanisms. In their view, such measures establish clear expectations regarding behaviour within organizations and help strengthen Indigenous employees' sense of safety and respect.

Yes, we have policies on interracial relations and policies against harassment [...], including racism [...]. We also have a complaint-handling policy. (XWD5)

In addition, many participants emphasized that the liaison officer can play an important role in raising employee awareness, notably through formal training and awareness activities, as well as through more informal discussions aimed at challenging certain perceptions and fostering greater mutual understanding.

Finally, participants also discussed the composition of work teams on drilling projects. Some mentioned that creating teams composed exclusively of Indigenous employees may appear to support cultural safety, but that this approach also carries risks of segregation and stigmatization within the workplace.

Yes, having mixed teams is valuable because, otherwise, we could end up with drilling rigs staffed only by Indigenous employees. Eventually, people might say, “That is the Indigenous crew’s drill. It is off in its own separate corner.” And that is not what we want. (XMDF2)

According to several participants, mixed teams were generally considered a more favourable approach because they encouraged interaction between Indigenous and non-Indigenous employees and allowed successes and challenges encountered on projects to be shared collectively. Some participants also noted that a team composed exclusively of Indigenous employees risked bearing all the blame if a problem or difficulty arose. From this perspective, mixed teams were seen as a way to promote collective responsibility and reduce certain forms of stigmatization in the workplace.

4.5.5. Industrial, cultural, and community realities

Indigenous and non-Indigenous participants emphasized that certain cultural differences can create challenges in the organization of work within the drilling sector. Differences were noted in particular in lifestyles, approaches to work, and the priorities given to professional, family, and community responsibilities. The mining industry and drilling sector were often associated with expectations of productivity, speed, and sustained performance, whereas certain Indigenous realities were described as placing greater emphasis on family and community relationships, as well as on cultural and traditional practices.

It is up to the employee to adapt to how things work in the mining industry. I would say that non-Indigenous people do not approach things in the same way. We probably do not have the same outlook. For them, it is about work, production, and productivity, whereas we are a little more... It is not about being lazy, not at all. We are simply more relaxed. (IMC13)

Participants noted that certain family, community, and cultural responsibilities can influence work organization and require adjustments on the part of employers. They referred in particular to absences related to seasonal traditional activities, cultural events,

or significant events within communities, such as deaths. In this context, several participants considered that a degree of organizational flexibility and appropriate management practices were necessary to support the cultural safety of Indigenous workers in the drilling sector.

The challenge is that we do not have the same pace of life. We get up and, excuse the expression, but it is like we have a firecracker up our ass. It is constantly go, go, go: the routine, work, possessions, the car, this and that. From what I understand, for them, life comes first. They need to hunt and fish. If someone passes away in the community, they put everything on hold. It is beautiful to see their culture. (XWD1)

In human resources, we often tell mining companies that cultural weeks are important to us. The same applies to statutory holidays. We do not observe June 24, Saint-Jean-Baptiste Day. Instead, we observe June 21 [National Indigenous Peoples Day] and September 30 [National Day for Truth and Reconciliation]. (IWC24)

4.6. Organizational capacity development

Partnerships were viewed as a means of developing the entrepreneurial capacities of Indigenous communities. Participants explained that several communities had entered the mining sector relatively recently and did not necessarily possess all the technical, administrative, and commercial knowledge required to operate independently. Partnerships therefore provided opportunities to acquire knowledge related to operations, project management, bidding processes, contract negotiation, regulatory requirements, and financial management.

For communities like ours and many others that are starting from further behind, particularly in the mining industry, partnerships are essential [...]. We still have a great deal to learn. (IMC20)

Some participants emphasized that partnerships with an experienced non-Indigenous company facilitate access to business networks, an established client base, and existing credibility in a competitive market.

It is about drawing on the expertise the company has already accumulated. Does that speed up the process? I think it does. (IMC18)

The advantage is having a company that is already well established and recognized. (IMC27)

Several participants explained that knowledge transfer was part of a longer-term vision aimed at achieving greater economic and operational autonomy for communities. Partnerships were therefore viewed as a transitional stage that would allow joint ventures

to gradually acquire their own equipment and management capabilities. Some participants described a process of gradual capitalization, in which the revenue generated would eventually allow the joint venture to purchase its own equipment, sometimes through the gradual buyout of equipment initially provided by the non-Indigenous partner. Ultimately, this progression would support the development of businesses capable of operating independently rather than remaining dependent on the non-Indigenous partner.

At the beginning, of course, [the drilling company] provides all the equipment, and we rent it. That is how we get started. But little by little, money remains in the business [...] until the day when the company has its own drilling rigs, its own equipment, its own workers, and can operate on its own. (XMD6)

Some participants mentioned having observed cases in which, following a period of knowledge transfer and support, Indigenous businesses continued operating independently.

One [entrepreneur] entered into a partnership with another First Nation and supported it throughout the process. Eventually, after the knowledge transfer was completed, he withdrew from the partnership [...]. That individual now has his own company. (IWC24)

Other participants nevertheless explained that greater autonomy did not necessarily imply a complete break with the non-Indigenous partner, but rather a relationship that would evolve over time. The forms of collaboration considered included the provision of equipment and the joint performance of contracts.

Eventually, we would like to become 100% autonomous with this company. And [the owner] is open to that [...], to eventually administering and managing our own company while remaining partners, but operating completely independently. We would also pursue our own contracts with them. (IMC27)

5. Conclusion

Impact and Benefit Agreements (IBAs) and ESG criteria are playing an increasingly important role in the awarding of mining contracts in Abitibi-Témiscamingue, leading service companies to develop more partnerships with Indigenous communities. In this rapidly changing context, the conditions that support the establishment of sustainable joint ventures remain poorly understood. This study therefore aimed to propose guidelines for the development of joint ventures between Indigenous communities and mining service companies in the region (Appendix 1).

The findings show that, from the perspective of service providers, joint ventures facilitate access to contracts, the territory, and business opportunities associated with mining development. For communities, joint ventures provide an opportunity to increase their participation in the regional economy and generate economic benefits on their territory. However, the growing interest in establishing joint ventures increases the number of approaches made to communities and intensifies competition among service companies. In this context, participants clearly emphasized the importance of developing partnerships based on genuine rather than symbolic Indigenous participation and avoiding arrangements in which Indigenous partners serve merely as fronts or have only limited involvement.

The success of joint ventures depends largely on the quality of the relationships between partners. Trust is generally built over several years through repeated interactions, a sustained presence in communities, and the gradual development of mutual understanding. This trust also rests on an understanding of Indigenous realities, respect for communities' own decision-making processes, ongoing communication between partners, and a commitment to maintaining transparent and loyal long-term relationships. The development of these partnerships is also influenced by political, community, and intercommunity dynamics that can sometimes be complex.

Joint ventures appear to be spaces where different visions of development come together. Respect for Indigenous values, families, cultural practices, and the land plays a central role in the expectations expressed toward partners. Beyond economic benefits, partnerships are

expected to reflect community values and recognize the importance placed on protecting the land, intergenerational relationships, and cultural transmission. Taking these dimensions into account helps strengthen the credibility and legitimacy of partnerships over the long term.

No single governance model emerged as the preferred approach. The preferences expressed varied among EDCs, private businesses owned by community members, and, in some cases, cooperative models. EDCs allow a portion of the benefits to be redistributed throughout the community and support local economic development. However, their role also raises concerns regarding the risk of political interference and the space given to private Indigenous entrepreneurship. A consensus emerged in favour of joint venture models in which the Indigenous partner holds a 51% ownership interest. Beyond the structure selected, participants emphasized the importance of ensuring meaningful Indigenous participation in governance and establishing mechanisms so that economic benefits are shared throughout the community.

The findings highlight several challenges related to access to capital, infrastructure, and the resources required to develop partnerships. In some communities, the limited availability of capital, the lack of commercial or industrial space, and difficulties in securing funding for certain types of training restrict opportunities for business development. Although various government programs and support organizations help address some of these needs, several constraints remain. Moreover, communities' contributions are not limited to financial investment. Access to the territory, community relationships, social acceptability, and the business opportunities associated with agreements concluded with communities represent important contributions to the partnership that should receive greater recognition in negotiations.

Hiring and developing the Indigenous workforce appear to be central benefits of joint ventures, which underscores the importance of establishing mechanisms that support the recruitment, workforce entry, retention, and training of Indigenous employees. The presence of liaison officers, the development of cultural competencies within

organizations, the adaptation of management practices to community realities, and the creation of culturally safe work environments help strengthen job attractiveness and support the long-term retention of Indigenous workers. However, these initiatives take place in a context marked by labour shortages in some communities and by the need to reconcile the demands of the drilling sector with cultural, family, and community realities. Finally, joint ventures are viewed as a means of progressively developing the organizational, entrepreneurial, and economic capacities of Indigenous communities. Through the gradual acquisition of knowledge, expertise, business networks, and assets, they support the progressive transfer of capacities to Indigenous partners. From this perspective, joint ventures appear less as an end in themselves than as a step toward greater economic autonomy.

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Appendix 1. Factors facilitating the development of joint ventures between Indigenous communities and mining service companies

4.1 Preliminary context for partnership development

- ☐ **Credible partnership intentions** — Develop partnerships based on meaningful involvement in operations, decision-making, and benefits.
- ☐ **Prevention of fronting arrangements** — Avoid agreements in which Indigenous participation is symbolic or limited.
- ☐ **Choice of partners and representatives** — Identify the legitimate individuals, governing bodies, or organizations with which to develop the partnership.
- ☐ **Intercommunity relations** — Take into account the dynamics among communities, overlapping territories, and existing agreements.
- ☐ **Training on Indigenous realities** — Raise awareness about the community's history, values, social realities, and ways of operating before initiating partnership discussions.
- ☐ **Trust** — Create regular opportunities to meet in professional, informal, and community settings.
- ☐ **Community presence** — Participate in community life and support local initiatives beyond business interests alone.

4.2 Development and maintenance of partnership relationships

- ☐ **Gradual relationship development** — Allow a period of mutual learning before formalizing the partnership in order to assess the compatibility of the partners' visions, expectations, and ways of operating. This period may last several years.
- ☐ **Prior collaboration** — Test the relationship through less binding forms of collaboration, such as employee leasing agreements and individual contracts.
- ☐ **Respect for community processes** — Respect the Indigenous community's internal consultation and decision-making processes. Respect the pace of such processes.
- ☐ **Clear communication** — Establish communication mechanisms from the outset to clarify expectations, coordinate operations, and prevent misunderstandings.
- ☐ **Regular follow-up** — Maintain ongoing and proactive communication between the partners.
- ☐ **Intermediary role** — Designate a liaison officer or establish a liaison mechanism to ensure the flow of information between the non-Indigenous company, the joint venture, and the Indigenous community.
- ☐ **Loyalty** — Avoid opportunistic behaviour that could undermine trust in the joint venture.
- ☐ **Grounding in Indigenous values** — Reflect, uphold, and convey the community's values and cultural realities in business relationships.
- ☐ **Environmental responsibility** — Adopt practices that respect the land.

- ☐ **Dialogue with the community** — Inform and consult the community, families, or individuals affected by activities carried out on the land.

4.3 Forms and governance of the partnership-based business

- ☐ **Business structure** — Choose a business structure that aligns with the community's realities, objectives, and level of entrepreneurial development.
- ☐ **Place for private entrepreneurship** — Prevent collective structures from limiting the emergence of private Indigenous entrepreneurs.
- ☐ **Indigenous majority ownership** — Favour a structure in which the Indigenous partner holds at least 51% of the joint venture.
- ☐ **Genuine control** — Ensure that the majority interest held by the Indigenous party translates into meaningful participation in decision-making.
- ☐ **Management autonomy** — Establish autonomous decision-making structures to limit political interference and ensure the stability of the partnership.
- ☐ **Capacity development** — Establish a mechanism to progressively strengthen the autonomy and expertise of Indigenous partners.
- ☐ **Respect for community values and needs** — Respect the criteria established by the community, for example regarding financial and decision-making participation, the location of the head office, and the hiring of Indigenous workers.
- ☐ **Board composition** — Establish a board of directors of a size that reflects community size and the availability of individuals to serve.
- ☐ **Prevention of deadlocks** — Establish dispute-resolution mechanisms while favouring consensus-based decision-making.
- ☐ **Head office** — Favour locating the head office in the community when infrastructure, local regulations, and the context allow.
- ☐ **Local benefits** — Use the joint venture as a means of supporting employment, training, and economic development within the community.
- ☐ **Benefit sharing** — Establish mechanisms for redistributing benefits, such as royalties, percentages tied to contracts, or contributions to a community fund.
- ☐ **Managing expectations** — Clarify benefit redistribution mechanisms without making unrealistic promises regarding the amounts or benefits expected.
- ☐ **Local procurement** — Prioritize the purchase of goods, services, and equipment from local suppliers.

4.4 Financing and infrastructure

- ☐ **Access to capital** — Identify available sources of financing while taking into account the limitations associated with the *Indian Act*.
- ☐ **Sharing the initial investment** — Agree on each partner's initial contribution in order to promote shared commitment to the joint venture.
- ☐ **Communities' non-financial contributions** — Recognize communities' non-financial contributions, including access to the land, social acceptability, and development opportunities.

- **Infrastructure development** — Support the development of offices, garages, storage facilities, or serviced land needed for economic activities within the community.
- **Financial support** — Mobilize programs and organizations that can support business start-up, equipment acquisition, training, or business expansion.

4.5 Indigenous workforce

- **Local hiring** — Prioritize the hiring of members of the Indigenous communities affected by activities carried out on their territories.
- **Indigenous employment objectives** — Include in the partnership agreement objectives and measures for recruiting and retaining Indigenous workers.
- **Liaison officer** — Hire a liaison officer to support Indigenous employment and facilitate communication among the company, Indigenous employees, and the community.
- **Recruitment process** — Structure the recruitment of Indigenous candidates in collaboration with human resources, the liaison officer, and community resource persons.
- **Indigenous trainers** — Encourage the hiring of Indigenous trainers to strengthen persistence, belonging, and cultural safety.
- **Training** — Provide structured and paid training in the workplace or within the community.
- **Workforce entry** — Support Indigenous employees as they enter the workforce and assist supervisors in understanding their realities.
- **Workforce retention** — Provide regular follow-up to prevent avoidable departures, misunderstandings, or dismissals.
- **Gradual progression** — Establish pathways that allow Indigenous employees to progress from entry-level positions to more specialized roles.
- **Cultural competencies** — Develop cultural competencies within the company through training on Indigenous realities.
- **Respectful workplace** — Implement clear policies against racism, sexism, harassment, and discriminatory behaviour.
- **Mixed teams** — Favour teams composed of Indigenous and non-Indigenous employees to prevent stigmatization and strengthen collective responsibility.
- **Balancing industrial requirements** — Find a balance between production requirements and the realities experienced by Indigenous workers.
- **Cultural and community realities** — Adopt flexible management practices that take family, community, and cultural responsibilities into account.

4.6 Organizational capacity development

- **Access to the partner's expertise** — Draw on the experience, networks, and credibility of the non-Indigenous partner to accelerate entry into the sector.

- **Division of responsibilities** — Clarify from the outset each partner's responsibilities for financial and administrative management and day-to-day operations.
- **Financial transparency** — Ensure access to the joint venture's financial statements, revenues, expenses, and related fees.
- **Shared control** — Ensure that Indigenous partners participate in major financial decisions and budgetary direction.
- **Knowledge transfer** — Provide support that allows the community to progressively develop technical, administrative, commercial, and financial knowledge.
- **Gradual autonomy and capitalization** — Establish a pathway for the joint venture to progressively develop its autonomy, particularly by acquiring its own assets, equipment, and management capabilities.
- **Evolution of the partnership** — Establish a pathway that allows the partnership to evolve over time, particularly through the gradual buyout of equipment and ownership interests by the Indigenous partner.

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