

THE *PLAN NORD* AND ABORIGINAL PEOPLE

BY ANN BIGUÉ, Ad. E. and FRÉDÉRIC PAGÉ

Last November 6, the government of Québec held an important working session that brought together various northern partners for the purpose of ensuring the sustainable and socially responsible development of the vast territory covered by the *Plan Nord*.

Back in the fall of 2008, the Québec government announced the introduction of this *Plan Nord* for the economic development of the territory of northern Québec. This plan essentially aims to accelerate economic development projects in the territory in a manner that is coordinated, orderly and respectful of the environment and local populations. The goal of the plan is to contribute to all of the government's initiatives so as to make Québec more prosperous, stimulate economic growth, and promote business investment. The government believes that the development of the potential of the mining, forestry, energy, tourism and wildlife resources in the North can be achieved through a new partnership with the northern communities, including the First Nations and the Inuit.

The process set out in the *Plan Nord* is particularly important for the mining industry. Indeed, more than 60% of mining exploration investments in Québec in 2008 were made in the territory covered by this Plan. In addition, we know that the mineral strategy for Québec announced last June provides for an increase in mining development, particularly through the improvement of knowledge concerning mining potential, improvement of access infrastructures, and the adoption of measures to encourage the participation of the communities, attract and train the necessary labour force and, finally, harmonize mining projects effectively with the other uses of the territory.

Territory covered

The *Plan Nord* applies to the entire territory of Québec north of the 49th parallel, except for Anticosti Island and the northern part of the Gaspé Peninsula, or nearly 72% of the entire territory of Québec. Thus, large portions of the regions of Saguenay-Lac-Saint-Jean and the Côte-Nord are included, as well as all of the Nord du Québec region (see www.plannord.gouv.qc.ca).

This vast area is inhabited by 121,000 people, or 1.6% of Québec's total population, and encompasses 63 towns, villages and communities, various maritime and airport infrastructures, as well as 217,806 km² of commercial forests. Almost 33,000 Aboriginal people from four nations live in the area: the Cree and the Inuit in the Nord-du-Québec region, and the Naskapi and Innu in the Côte-Nord region.

Partners' discussion table

Representatives from the municipalities, Aboriginal nations, economic and environmental organizations, educational and research organizations, as well as the relevant government departments and agencies will participate at the partners' discussion table.

The November 6 working document states that “through an approach based on partnership, respect, awareness and openness to all the players concerned, a new approach for collaboration between local communities, the government and the private sector will be defined.” Since the territory comprises 31 Aboriginal and 32 non-Aboriginal communities, the harmonization of the interests of these communities is clearly a condition of the development.

Aboriginal people

In particular, the process for developing the *Plan Nord* must be consistent with the undertakings given by the government in the agreements already concluded and in negotiations currently underway with Aboriginal nations that deal with this territory. We are referring in particular to the *James Bay and Northern Quebec Agreement* (Crees and Inuit), the *Northeastern Quebec Agreement* (Naskapis), the *Paix des Braves* (Crees) and the *Sanarrutik Agreement* (Inuit).

The government is also calling for the participation of the Innu communities, including those not residing within the territory of the *Plan Nord*, but who have signed the *Agreement-In-Principle of a General Nature* (AIPGN) concerning the use of a part of the territory covered by the *Plan Nord*.

Thus, the government expects Aboriginal people to participate both in the process for developing the *Plan Nord* and in the resulting economic development. They are invited to participate at the partners' discussion table as well as the Aboriginal partners' discussion tables devoted to Aboriginal issues.

Sustainable development

From the perspective of sustainable development, the various environmental assessment processes set out in the *Environment Quality Act* and the *James Bay and Northern Quebec Agreement*, the environmental inspections and controls, the biodiversity conservation zones and, above all else, the participation of the local and Aboriginal communities are key factors to the success of the *Plan Nord*.

Contribution by government

The government will contribute in a number of different sectors and in different ways. For example, with respect to the development of the labour force, Québec has set up programs tailored to the specific needs of the regions concerned. They enable the communities to play an active role in the search for solutions with businesses in order to provide for adequate training. With regard to transportation, the government has already announced investments for improving the state of transportation networks and infrastructures, including projects to extend Highway 167 toward the Otish Mountains from Chibougamau and to repair and upgrade Highway 389 between Baie-Comeau and Fermont.

Reconciliation

Certain Aboriginal nations and communities support most of these measures. The Grand Chief of the Grand Council of the Crees (Eeyou Istchee), Matthew Coon Come, views the *Plan Nord* as an opportunity for greater involvement by the Cree community. This sentiment was echoed by the Chief of the Conseil des Montagnais de Natashquan: "[translation] The Natashquan Innu Nation is very conscious of the future that awaits it. A boat or train is passing by. We must get on board, assert ourselves, and position ourselves so that we can have our share with respect to all this development." (www.plannord.gouv.qc.ca)

On the other hand, the *Plan Nord* seems to face some opposition from other Aboriginal nations or communities. The Chief of the Assembly of First Nations of Québec and Labrador, Ghislain Picard, is asking for a "true dialogue" and cites the guidelines "clearly expressed" by the Supreme Court of Canada concerning the obligation of the Crown to consult and accommodate Aboriginal people.

All of the actors involved in the *Plan Nord* should continue to act with respect, awareness and openness in order to achieve the sustainable development of the natural resources of the North, for the benefit of all.

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