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Indigenous communities must be part of the global green energy revolution

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The signing of the Paris Agreement on climate change on Earth Day (April 22) to curb global carbon emissions is as pregnant with the promise of a successful energy transition as it is fraught with the potential of failure to deliver meaningful change. Together with the collective global commitment to address climate change, there is an equally compelling but linked challenge of meeting the needs of the energy poor: a third of humanity with little or no access to electricity or modern energy services. The true tragedy would be progress on decarbonization that yet again leaves billions in the dark. Delivering clean, affordable energy is an obligation that must be met in unison with the goals of a cleaner environment.

Affordable energy for all is as relevant for Canada in meeting the energy needs of our own remote northern and indigenous communities as it is for Canada's role in fostering positive change at the global level. The opportunity is to create the conditions for a pathway for the energy poor to be drawn into the economic mainstream. A compelling economic case for investment in high-quality infrastructure is buttressed by an ethical requirement to ensure that the distant, dispersed and the disadvantaged citizens globally and in Canada have a fair shake at improving their quality of life.

The current state of the energy infrastructure that serves our northern and indigenous population is crumbling and inadequate. Efforts to improve matters over the past decade or so have been deeply mired in intergovernmental red tape and jurisdictional issues. Negotiations to determine the share of provincial and federal financial contributions – when conducted with poor intent and hostility – invariably result in a stalemate with no tangible improvements in the community.

The rationale for action now is simple and the business case compelling enough to allow different communities to get actively involved in shaping the solutions that make most sense to them. Estimates for Ontario communities alone put cost savings conservatively at \$1-billion over time in the switch from diesel to grid connection.

Dirty diesel delivered by air over long distances at huge costs to remote communities makes little sense. In sharp contrast, we need to focus on cleaner, renewable and local energy sources, such as solar, wind and mini-hydro where available, as well as geothermal and bioenergy sources, combined with better demand management of energy use and smart technologies.

Why energy over other priorities? Availability of energy is a key determinant of economic, social, educational and health outcomes. Without a supply of adequate energy services, other critical infrastructure that supports the provision of clean water, sewage treatment, educational and medical needs becomes problematic. Energy infrastructure is the backbone and energy service the thread that connects disparate needs.

Once we remove the crutch of fossil-based energy supply, distributed and local energy resources then become an important part of meeting the need for energy services in these communities. A firm commitment to clean energy in our northern and indigenous communities would be a powerful impetus to the development of self-standing microgrids and smarter energy systems to fulfill community-specific requirements. A positive but intended consequence would be to set in motion the technological innovations required to meet the challenge of delivering sustainable energy solutions in harsh, remote environments. Improved quality of life and economic opportunity for residents and indigenous companies adds further to the

case for action.

The energy disadvantaged of the world have been with us for far too long waiting for promises by politicians to be fulfilled. Canada can now begin to promote global leadership in shaping not only the climate change challenge, but promote universal energy access in lockstep. And in doing so, we can create export opportunities for our clean-tech sector in the global marketplace.

Canada's recent budget not only has financial flexibility but it is suffused with a positive attitude and desire to help those who have been marginalized. This is the time to make the necessary investments in a high-quality, clean energy infrastructure for our indigenous communities. Jatin Nathwani is a professor and Ontario Research Chair in Public Policy for Sustainable Energy at the University of Waterloo. Colin Andersen is chair of the Energy Council of Canada, former chief executive officer of the Ontario Power Authority and former Ontario deputy finance minister.

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