Miawpukek First Nation (MFN) in Conne River, Newfoundland and Labrador, has been recognized in the Atlantic region and Canada for a number of significant achievements. The community successfully manages a range of service delivery programmes, capital and capacity building projects, and, more recently, self government negotiations with the Federal and Provincial governments.

The community established a partnership with the Aboriginal Community Development Centre (ACDC) at Mount Allison University in Sackville, New Brunswick in 2005. MFN was motivated to share its records and data related to the community’s experiences on the path to self-governance. The Mount Allison team was eager to work with MFN in creating a resource centre and repository. Among the documents selected for the repository were letters, contracts and reports exchanged among MFN, Indian and Northern Affairs Canada (INAC) and the Provincial and Federal governments. These have been collected and digitized for access on the Internet. Miawpukek and Mount Allison partners recognized that individual interviews with members of the band and the self-government negotiation team members would be of significant value, providing a more comprehensive picture of this complex undertaking. Interviews allowed for the sharing of personal thoughts, ideas, and expectations.

Each step of the interview process, from conception to execution, was taken with agreement between Miawpukek and Mount Allison representatives.
Twelve interviews were conducted during a visit to Conne River in August 2005. Interviewees were Miawpukek First Nation’s Chief; Band Council members; MFN staff including the General Manager, Director of Finance and Administration, and Director of Economic Development; health care professionals; teachers; and community members including youth and elders. This document summarizes the responses to the questions each interviewee was asked.

In what ways has the community’s path to self-governance touched your life?

The ways in which each participant perceived self-government depended greatly on their background, personal experiences, visions for the future, and level of involvement in the self-government process. Many respondents argued that Conne River is now, and always has been, self-governing. To this point, however, self-government has not been formalized. As Chief Mi’isel Joe explained, “What we are seeing today is a more formalized sense of governance, and to me, it’s just more of the same. It’s giving our younger people a sense of a system that is put into place to formalize how we govern ourselves as Mi’kmaq people” (Conne River, August 10, 2005). To many respondents self-government was especially important when considering the community’s youth and future. It was noted that through the process of negotiating self-government, the youth are provided with additional avenues for community participation and opportunities to voice their ideas, concerns, and hopes.

1 Full text and audio transcripts of all the interviews are available through the Aboriginal Community Resource Centre and Repository at Mount Allison University. Searches by interviewee may be performed in the MTA Library Catalogue, or on the Centre’s web site.
Interviewees felt that they were very much part of this process and their personal lives were affected by gaining access to community-administered programmes. For example, the health and social services offered by community health care professionals through the recently-erected Health Centre have addressed ongoing medical care needs including primary and dental care, and psychological wellness. Economic developments, including the paving of frequently-traveled main roads and extensions to land occupied by Miawpukek band members, have only enhanced and motivated individuals involved with the self-government process. Kelly Drew, the Miawpukek community social worker, communicated how beneficial self-government has been within her community on economic and personal levels:

I’ve studied a lot and reflected a lot on how many Aboriginal communities are having a hard time, and I’m a firm believer that self-government is a big part of our people doing better and actually having some control over their lives. Most say that they want to be able to make those kinds of decisions on their own, just like they did a long time ago (Conne River, August 10, 2005).

**How and when did you come to be a part of the process?**

Interviews were conducted with a broad range of individuals with various occupations and strengths, and responses to this question tended to relate directly to interviewees’ particular involvement and role within the community. Many reported both direct and indirect involvement through attending information sessions, participating in focus groups, working with youth and spending time with elders. The band’s commitment to self-government being an inclusive process made this involvement possible.
Can you tell me a little bit more about your role in the process?

The roles that MFN community members play in the process of achieving self-government range from modest participation to the extensive involvement such as taking part in negotiation meetings with government representatives. Tammy Drew, General Manager, comments that in addition to being one of the chief negotiators, her role in the self-government process entails imparting her knowledge of Conne River’s history and current issues as experienced in her day-to-day life. Chief Mi’sel Joe feels his role is one of guidance and support, performed by seeing that the process remains in the hands of the community. Others reported that their involvement included keeping up to date with fellow community members, attending and participating in Council meetings, focus groups and community consultations. These activities illustrate the democratic process of collective decision-making that is profoundly important to the Miawpukek people. Many respondents remarked that they would like to take a much greater role, and noted that their role is just a part of a much larger community-driven process.

What have been your best experiences of the process of self-government?

When interviewees spoke about self-government in Miawpukek, they emphasized that the process has been shaped by the community’s distinct set of values and its hopes for the future. They reported several key benefits and positive experiences arising from the negotiations for self-government, including
a growing professional workforce within the community, the ability to form community-specific laws and by-laws within a functioning governance structure, and working with an influential and respected Chief who is capable of overseeing and guiding the process. A particularly beneficial aspect of the self-governance process highlighted by most respondents was that it created more life opportunities for all community members, and for youth in particular. Others noted that the development of self-government allows the community to take ownership of its affairs and turn this process into a truly community-driven venture. However, many informants recognized that this is a long-term process that is still in the early stages. “The best experiences today probably won’t be the best experiences tomorrow,” says Yvonne John, Director of Finance and Administration (Conne River, August 11, 2005). Community members believe that Miawpukek First Nation will continue to grow and develop whether or not self-government negotiations succeed.

**What have been some of the more challenging obstacles or barriers to overcome throughout the process?**

Although many members of the Miawpukek First Nation acknowledged that this process has been a positive force overall, as with any new endeavour certain obstacles or barriers have been encountered. They agree that those involved must keep in mind that this is a long-term undertaking and that challenges attributed to its newness will eventually be overcome.
Many of the community members interviewed recognized structural and political differences between MFN’s system and those of the Federal and Provincial Governments. Much concern was expressed over government partners’ need to take initiative in educating themselves about the traditions, values, morals and history of Conne River. Yvonne John elaborated that there needs to be mutual understanding between Conne River and the governments as to how the community operates, and the necessity of keeping the community regularly informed of the governments’ positions. Interviewees also remarked on the importance of having a ‘check and balance’ through consultations within the community in relation to self-government negotiations.

Some respondents noted that there was a need to help community members understand the process of self-government. A more comprehensive understanding can be achieved through personal initiative and with help from the self-government team.

**What does self-government in Conne River mean to you?**

In responding to this more personal question a number of interviewees contended that Conne River has always been self-governing. Many people consider this initiative to be a reaffirmation of their right to decide what is best for their own community. To Chief Mi’isel Joe, self-government in Conne River means that “[the community] can put together a traditional form of [their own] laws, looking at [their] own judicial systems of how it used to work in the past and how [the community] can mold those two together – the new and the old – and
make them work” (Conne River, August 10, 2005). To Rod Jeddore, self-government means “being in control of your own community, making your own laws, governing your own people and looking after your own needs – whether it be guidelines for the land or guidelines for everyday traffic. It’s being self-sufficient” (Conne River, August 11, 2005). Involvement in the self-governance process has reinforced Miawpukek First Nation’s members’ sense of their distinct identity. Further, they feel empowered to make their own decisions and create their own opportunities. Priscilla Drew, a community elder and retired school teacher fluent in the traditional Mi’kmaq language, asserted that self-government in Conne River is positive because the people know what the community needs. In Ottawa, others may not be as familiar with the community and the situations it encounters (Conne River, August 11, 2005).

What do you envision for a self-governing future for your children, grandchildren, and community on a more day-to-day basis?

Interviewees envisioned new opportunities, social and cultural benefits, as well as a heightened sense of independence and self-sufficiency for Band members. Chief Mi’sel Joe made clear that self-government will mean “a full fledged government no different from any other government, except that it is an Aboriginal First Nations government based on ancient laws and customs of the Mi’kmaq people of Newfoundland” (Conne River, August 10, 2005).

Taking care of their own governance has become second nature to most members of MFN. Everyday life under self-government will be familiar to the
younger generations because it is what they have always known. Kelly Drew stated that self government in Conne River “would mean people [will] feel more connected to what they are doing. There will be lots of struggles, just as we have today, but I like to think that those will be our struggles and that we are quite capable of handling them” (Conne River, August 10, 2005). Although there may not be a drastic change in everyday activities and routines with official self-governance status, interviewees believe that there will be more short-term and long-term community stability. Many respondents also commented on the Indian Act, remarking that they are working their way out of it as part of becoming self governing.

If you are familiar with the exploratory process of self-government, can you describe how you think the process was handled by the community? How do you think the process was handled by the Federal and Provincial Governments?

“This is one of the best times [I have] ever seen all parties working together”, said Rod Jeddore in response to these questions (Conne River, August 11, 2005). The people of Miawpukek proved that they are able to follow through in realizing their community’s goals. Such success is possible because there is a high level of community involvement and positive working relationships with the various stakeholders. Although many interviewees did not feel comfortable answering these questions, or not in detail, they nonetheless
commented that the community had entered the process of self-government with trusting hearts and open arms.

Several interviewees recalled challenging times when it seemed that the government was hesitant to begin the process. At other times the government partner wanted to move the process more quickly than members of Miawpukek First Nation were comfortable in doing. Some respondents admitted that their perspectives could be biased, but believed that as it evolved the collaborative process grew stronger.

**What advice can you offer to other First Nations communities?**

The interviews revealed that community members were very willing to offer advice to other First Nations communities seeking self-governance. Respondents reflected on the wonderful opportunity they had to learn from others, to provide avenues for input and information, and to participate in focus groups and community discussions. Based on their experiences they advised that the process requires much patience, perseverance, and strength – that “a united force will create a force in the end that is enduring” (Kelly Drew, Conne River, August 10, 2005). Community capacity building projects have reinforced a sense of solidarity in Conne River, and have paralleled the self-government initiative. It is a deeply-held belief that self-government must be driven by a community and that it continues to see the ‘big picture’. As Chief Mi’isel Joe said, the community must “let the grassroots people lead the chariot because it’s their process” (Conne River, August 10, 2005).
Many proponents of the process of self-government in Conne River also emphasized the importance of governance literacy: understanding of why and how a government functions, what is required for success, and comprehending the implications of self-governance. The community and individuals need to understand the details and inner-workings of government systems, and the importance of constitutions, amendments, policies, by-laws and procedures. By sharing knowledge and experiences, members of Miawpukek First Nation hope to provide a glimpse into the process of self-government. It is hoped that MFN’s perspective will be of value to others in determining their path toward self governance.

What does the community need to have or prepare in order to carry out the process successfully?

Interviewees commented on the importance of a community-driven initiative and emphasized active member involvement and communication with the community’s political leaders and staff. Many also noted the importance of informing and educating Band members in a straightforward manner about what self-government will mean now and in the future. There was a feeling that continuing education could help allay fears and uncertainties among community members.

Chief Mi’sel Joe stressed that patience is an asset during self-government negotiations. “There is no magic time limit on this – it can only happen when it’s supposed to happen and when that process is ready and everyone is happy with
[it], only then can you move forward with that information. Then you have a good platform to move forward with” (Conne River, August 10, 2005). It was noted that though this process in Conne River is clearly community-driven, it requires the cooperation of the Chief and Council and their constituents during every phase of discussions and negotiations.

If the process were to begin again from the start, would you make any changes?

When looking back at the self-government process, many interviewees responded that they did not wish they had handled the process differently. They believed that each step – whether it seemed positive or negative at the time – was an integral and ultimately constructive step in actualizing community development initiatives and leading Miawpukek First Nation toward its goals. Many felt that it has been invaluable to have a leading force propelling this process toward a common objective, commenting on how effective Judy White, Self-Government Advisor and Negotiator, has been at the main negotiating table, and as a mentor in the community.

While key respondents reported that there were no major adjustments they would make to MFN’s steps towards self-government, some mentioned slight modifications they feel would improve the process. In particular, they believe that perhaps more background information, communication, and regular community reporting would enhance awareness and understanding of the issues facing the community. One suggestion was to create a timeline or newsletter
indicating progress in relation to community objectives, deadlines, and accomplishments throughout the course of negotiations.

We are documenting the process of self-government in Conne River. Who do you think will benefit from this initiative and why?

Responses to this question varied according to the personal experiences and beliefs of the community members. Many felt that the creation of an information repository documenting their process of self-government offers a variety of opportunities and benefits for their own community, other First Nations, teachers, researchers, and young people. Ansalewit Joe, a youth in the community who became involved in the process and began educating others about self-government, remarked that this initiative is very valuable in that “almost anything you want to find is on the Internet these days, and I think a lot of younger people will connect with that” (Conne River, August 10, 2005). Chief Mi’sel Joe added that this process has also been a force serving to draw together those with differing views, “bringing the traditionalists together with the non traditionalists, and [bringing] people that sit on the fence to the table. It has raised awareness in the community of what we’re doing now in terms of our own government” (Conne River, August 10, 2005).

Publicizing this endeavour creates opportunities to educate other First Nations and the general public. Phil Jeddore felt that building awareness will benefit Newfoundland and Labrador residents in particular. Those that know little about self-governance issues, and Miawpukek in particular, will learn that once
self-government is achieved, the local area will benefit from the creation of employment opportunities among other outcomes of the initiative. Many community members also expressed their wish to make this information easily available and accessible.