
FRANCOPHONES IN NORTHWESTERN ONTARIO: AN ECONOMIC LEVER FOR THE ENTIRE REGION

A new era in relations between Francophones and Anglophones in Ontario

Relations between Ontario's francophone minority and its anglophone majority have not always been easy. Linguistic tensions existed in several regions in the past. However, we have seen an about-face in the past twenty years or so.

The *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms* guarantees access to instruction in French-language schools. The *Criminal Code* guarantees access to justice in French. The provincial government supports the delivery of health services, social services and community services in French in twenty-five designated regions of the Province. These services are also offered in a central office of a ministry or a branch office located in a designated area or by going on-line at Service Ontario. The majority understands and accepts that these services contribute to the vitality of the entire province.

Over the past three years, our firm has had the opportunity to work in Northwestern Ontario. We have occasionally heard people ask, "Why bother investing in the region's Francophone minority? It's so small it hardly counts."

There are two answers to this question.

First, Francophones make up 1.4% of the population of Northwestern Ontario. So is it worth investing in such a proportionally small group? Those who ask this question should know that the total population of Northwestern Ontario represents 1.9% of the total population of Ontario. So the same question applies: Is it worth investing in Northwestern Ontario, given that it accounts for such a small proportion of the province's total population? Obviously, the answer is yes. And the same reasoning applies for the region's Francophones.

There is a second answer to this question, which we consider even more important.

A new trend has been emerging in recent years: stronger ties are being forged between Ontario's Francophones and Anglophones. The same is true in other parts of Canada where Francophones are in the minority.

Many municipalities are coming to the realization that francophone communities represent an outstanding **strategic advantage** for their anglophone neighbours, in economic terms as well as at the cultural and social levels. Why?

An asset for the benefit of an entire local community

French is one of Canada's two official languages. Because of their minority status, Ontario's francophone communities receive federal and provincial subsidies to support their vitality.

Funds invested in francophone communities also benefit neighbouring Anglophones by generating spinoffs in many forms.

- They help support schools, colleges and universities, at the same time improving access to education and attracting new residents to the community.
- They serve to develop tourism by promoting arts and culture attractions and supporting the organization of various festivals, all of which stimulate the local economy.
- They contribute to the establishment and maintenance of institutions such as cultural centres, community centres, health centres, French-language media as well as economic development projects.

"French dollars"

Anglophones in some communities are strongly in favour of developing the local francophone community. They have dubbed this economic activity "French dollars".

They are aware that, although this funding is intended to support Francophones, it benefits the entire population. Every job created with "French dollars" invigorates the local economy by increasing sales of local products and services, house and lot sales, municipal tax bases, etc.

Commerce and the French language

The benefits derived from the presence of Francophones in a predominantly anglophone province or territory extend beyond local and regional boundaries.

A strategic asset already at hand in Ontario

At the international level, Europe and Africa represent two vast markets in which French is used extensively.

It is imperative that Northwestern Ontario, like the rest of Canada, continue diversifying its markets. Developing trade with primarily French-speaking markets represents a huge challenge for most regions of the country. But Northwestern Ontario has an exceptional strategic and economic edge in this regard: its francophone minority population.

Many countries recognize the strategic and economic advantages associated with being able to conduct business in French. The following example will probably come as a surprise to most people. In its November 6, 2010 edition, the "China Daily" reported that China will be increasing the number of Chinese students studying in France to 50,000 over the next five years. Why would China invest so much in French-language education if it didn't see a real economic gain in doing so?

This is a strategic asset already at hand in Ontario, through its French-language schools. Clearly, funds invested in French-language schools work to the advantage of the entire province, not just Francophones.

The French language: a powerful economic lever

Sharing the same language makes it easier to understand a culture and cements business dealings.

Most native-born Francophones in Ontario must be fluent in French and English. As a result, they can develop ties with French-speaking business communities in Canada and abroad, to their own benefit as well as to the benefit of their anglophone neighbours and business partners and their municipalities.

This makes the use of French in Northwestern Ontario a powerful economic lever for the entire region.

French in Northwestern Ontario: an economic tool for the benefit of all

In recent years, we have had the pleasure of working on several projects in Northern Ontario. We have seen first-hand the economic advantage that francophone communities represent for the entire population of Northwestern Ontario.

Francophones in Northwestern Ontario are willing and able to help develop external markets in which their language will be an asset.

Northwestern Ontario is a microcosm of Canadian society. There is a unique opportunity here to position French as an economic development tool that works to the advantage of the whole region.

Adopting such an approach would serve the interests of the anglophone communities and First Nations as well as the Francophones themselves, because all of them play a unique role in the economy of the province and the country.

Conclusion

Northwestern Ontario is in an advantageous position. The region's Francophones are well organized. The actions undertaken by francophone institutions and organizations reinforce the francophone population in various sectors including education, health, community and economic development, culture, women, youth and seniors.

In economic terms, the French language is a resource under-utilized by Anglophone neighbours.

Raising the French community's profile is a key strategy for expanding business relations between Northwestern Ontario and new national and international markets. The region's various cities, towns and districts will reap the benefits of "French dollars" flowing into their communities. They will also acquire a role in the francophone economic space in Canada and abroad, a role being actively pursued by other Canadian regions as well.

A few figures

The presence of French in Canada

Francophone communities exist in all provinces and territories outside Quebec. Based on the 2006 census, there are 1,012,530 Francophones residing outside Quebec, half of whom live in Ontario.

The presence of French in Ontario

Francophone Population by Regions					
Region	Francophones	Total Population	Francophones in Total Population %	Regional Distribution of Francophone Population %	Regional Distribution of Total Population %
Ontario	582,695	12,028,900	4.8	100.0	100.0
East	242,055	1,578,960	15.3	41.5	13.1
Central	167,235	8,158,825	2.0	28.7	67.8
Southwest	34,390	1,514,140	2.3	5.9	12.6
Northeast	130,825	544,600	24.0	22.5	4.5
Northwest	8,190	232,370	3.5	1.4	1.9
Champlain	226,465	1,084,930	20.9	38.9	9.0
Toronto	53,375	2,476,565	2.2	9.2	20.6
EKL ¹	21,965	623,275	3.5	3.8	5.2
ACMS ²	99,490	387,780	25.7	17.1	3.2
MNPST ³	32,205	213,095	15.1	5.5	1.8

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¹ Essex, Kent, Lambton

² Algoma, Cochrane, Manitoulin, Sudbury

³ Muskoka, Nipissing, Parry Sound, Timiskaming