



MCK GOVERNANCE PROJECT

Community Engagement Report
Summary Version

December 2020

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What is the MCK Governance Project?

The MCK Governance Project is an on-going initiative to review and strengthen the effectiveness and accountability of the MCK Council of Chiefs and the envision the future of governance in our community. The project started in February 2019 and its first phase focused on the current policies, regulation, legislation, and other governing documents of the MCK Council of Chiefs and addressed urgent policy issues related to the operation and administration of the Council of Chiefs.

The most recent phase of the project consisted of a broad and multi-faceted engagement with the community. The perspectives of key individuals with experiences working in the MCK and other systems and in the political life of the community were sought out, and there was an open call for work and family-based groups of community members to share their views.

The Third Phase, scheduled to start in early 2021, will be a broader process of community engagement and visioning on the broader issues and institutions of governance in Kahnawà:ke with respect to the community mandate to return to traditional government.

Community Engagement Process

The Community Engagement Process was conducted using a Kitchen Table Consultation approach, which was chosen to promote person-to-person dialogue and encourage an informal discussion in spaces that were familiar to participants.

Confidentiality was essential to the work and was of paramount importance to the researchers to ensure that community members felt comfortable and safe sharing their perspectives and opinions. For all engagement sessions, formal consent and confidentiality statements were conveyed and agreed to by all participants, and the researchers took extraordinary measures to store digitized information confidentially, accessible only to the researchers for the purpose of accurate representation of input.

The dialogue was guided by questions centering on themes of accountability and transparency of Council chiefs, standards, and expectations for professional conduct by Council chiefs, roles and responsibilities of Council chiefs, and leadership selection process and qualification criteria. Community input was gathered through the researchers' active listening, respectful observation, and careful notetaking.

The consultation period began in December 2019 and ran through September 2020. There were 200 community members who participated in semi-structured interviews, group dialogues, and focused conversations on the themes of the project. These include five workplace sessions, involving forty people; six family group sessions, involving seventy people; four individual consultations; two open forums involving thirty people; and approximately forty people who engaged in more casual conversations on the project's themes during public information sessions held at the Community Services Complex, Kahnawà:ke Survival School, and Tóta Ma's Café.

Aside from these consultations, the researchers also appeared on CKRK Radio's talk show to discuss the project on three occasions and participated and observed the emergency community meeting on the Solidarity Blockades in February 2020 to gain insight on the conduct of the meetings and perceptions of the Council of Chiefs in the overall governance of the community.



Community Advisory Group

A volunteer Community Advisory Group was formed in December 2019 as an accountability structure for the researchers. The role of the group was to provide advice and guidance to the researchers in their work on the project. Membership in the advisory group was open and fluid, and at the present time the members of the group's members are Peggy Mayo, Tonia Williams, Linda Delormier, Thawennontie Thomas, Melanie Gilbert, Veronica Leborgne, Iohahiio Delisle, Louis Delisle, and Alan John Rice.

Findings

The discussions revealed that there are greatly varying levels of knowledge about the history of Kahnawà:ke among community members, notably relating to politics and government. It was observed by participants that misunderstandings of the history and structure of governance and law in the community contribute significantly to Kahnawà:ke's political culture being characterized by division, irreconcilable views and conflict.

In nearly every session, there was a significant interest in questions of Kahnawà:ke governance at the level beyond the scope of the current framing of the issues of the MCK Council of Chiefs. These discussions most often turned to the following broader issues:

- Political reunification of the community
- The need for a good working relationship between various political groups
- Restoring Onkwehonwe culture and ways of being on personal and collective levels
- Re-envisioning the meaning of traditional government and leadership in today's reality

The engagement sessions consistently drew attention to the fact that there is a communication gap between MCK chiefs and community members. There is a sense that there is insufficient or ineffective information sharing by the MCK, and that this gap is the cause of misunderstanding and contributes to a sense of mistrust of the MCK among a large number of people in the community.

As well, it was clear that there is little awareness by or involvement of young people in the community in the affairs of the MCK or politics in general. This disconnection from the political sphere is at the root of much skepticism and distrust of political institutions and leaders among Kahnawà:ke youth.

It was also consistently noted that the types of spaces created, and methods used to conduct this process of community engagement – the personal conversations, Kitchen Table Consultations and the Open Forums – was itself a manifestation of a move towards implementing traditional cultural principles and methods. It was felt as a restoration of trust and community values, particularly because people were engaged in their own homes and workplaces and that a safe and trusting environment was consciously fostered, along with the fact that the discussions were done in an informal style, with food provided.

Overall, there were three issues that were consistent focal points from the perspective of community members who participated in the engagement sessions: 1) MCK chiefs' answerability to the people, or the accountability process; 2) expectations and standards of professional behaviour and ethics for MCK Chiefs, or a Code of Conduct; and 3) minimal qualifications for MCK chiefs' positions, or the criteria for eligibility to run for office.

Views on the Accountability of Chief and Council

The engagement sessions made clear that people in Kahnawà:ke see accountability in very practical terms and mainly as a straightforward question of the MCK chiefs' answerability to the people of Kahnawà:ke. There were no major criticisms of the existing policies and procedures, as participants did not focus so much on rules. Rather, there was more of an interest towards having accessibility and answerability from the chiefs, with a much more openness on their daily business and activities. There were some general and a few specific criticisms of the present situation as it related to the chiefs' whereabouts, meetings, substance of discussions with outside authorities, etc. Overall, accountability in Kahnawà:ke is viewed in terms of personal accountability and in the daily relationship between community members and MCK chiefs on both professional and human levels.

*"All I want is to be included in the future of my life."
– Chris Montour*

In discussions on the concepts of trust, openness and transparency, these were seen as practical principles that were guideposts for the chiefs' exercise of the authority they are vested with, and which generate support and legitimacy for the chiefs as representatives of the community. The specific feedback from the community on the theme of accountability reflects this sense of things. The desire for accessible information on MCK chiefs' schedules and their work and progress toward meeting goals and tasks assigned to them in their portfolio mandates was present throughout the sessions. This was consistent with the wish of many people to have the chiefs much more active in informing the community directly on the work they are doing. As well, the idea of instituting a system of regular performance evaluations for chiefs was mentioned many times.

In the sessions, it did not seem that many people are concerned about the specifics of financial transactions from government funding, as there was no direct criticism of the chiefs in this sense. However, there was quite a bit of concern expressed on the nature and implementation of regulations around the involvement of MCK chiefs in private businesses and how this may affect their decision-making.

There was much discussion on the need for a mechanism for the community to bring questions, issues, complaints, and conflicts involving the MCK chiefs forward in an objective and regulated environment. Aside from universal suggestions for an ombudsperson role, community meetings were referred to as one of the prime means of accountability in the present system. It was expressed, nearly unanimously, that seasonal meetings are not sufficient and should take place more frequently. As well, there was a strong sense that the present structure of community meetings is not conducive to respectful engagement and that this hinders accountability, especially regarding these three points:

- The agenda is set by the MCK chiefs with no input from community members
- There is no mechanism for community members to hold MCK chiefs to account on follow-through
- The open discussion part of meetings most often turns conflictual and unproductive

Views on the Professional Conduct of Chief and Council

The general view is that MCK chiefs are representatives of the community and that they should embody the highest standards of personal and professional conduct in their public and private lives. Community members' opinions on this principle varied in terms of focus and there were many specific incidents and examples – both positive and negative – brought forward to illustrate the opinions expressed during the discussions.



There was an open acknowledgement of the effects of historic and ongoing traumas in families and the people in Kahnawà:ke, and remarkable sensitivity was present in the discussions to the fact that everyone, including the MCK chiefs, carry this weight. There was very little personalized criticism of individual chiefs, as empathy and understanding were expressed towards the levels of difficulty of the work that MCK chiefs do. The discussions tended to focus on the ethics of leadership and the need to recreate the identity of what a chief should be in both the conceptual sense and in relation to the MCK system today.

Overall, the idea is that MCK chiefs are role models and that they carry the responsibilities of leaders of the community. This often led people to point towards the direction provided in the Kaianere'kó:wa as the framework for their expectations of MCK chiefs, not only on their political roles, but on their behaviour, even in terms of the way chiefs dress, speak and carry themselves in at work and in public.

“Focus on the big issues, allow the departments handle their jobs.”

-Community member

Views on the Roles and Responsibilities of Chief and Council

Participants in the engagement sessions were universally critical of MCK chiefs' involvement in the operational details and workings of their portfolio mandates. There is a strong belief that

MCK chiefs should focus on their political roles and responsibilities and not involve themselves at the administrative level or in daily business matters in their portfolio areas.

The discussions also highlighted the desire for MCK chiefs to be more aware and responsive to the contemporary colonial nature of the relationship between our nation and Canadian laws, and of the differences and inherent conflicts that continue to exist between the best interests of Kahnawà:ke and the dictates of Canadian law. As well, it was clear that people believe that MCK chiefs should strive to represent the ethics and principles and laws of Mohawk nationhood first and foremost, even when it brings the MCK and community into conflict with outside laws and authorities.

The issue of the name of the MCK chiefs' position came up several times in discussions and received exceptional criticism, though it was acknowledged that it is not necessarily the result of chiefs' actions or intentions.

There was also general criticism on the amount of vacation time the chiefs receive, and specifically the idea of a “summer hiatus”. It was a strong consensus that the work of the Council of Chiefs should continue uninterrupted throughout the year.

Views on the System for Selecting Leaders

The issue of criteria for eligibility for holding office was a major point of discussion in all the public engagement sessions. There were a wide range of opinions expressed, especially regarding educational background.

Participants held various opinions on whether a person needs to be educated in a formal academic sense to be eligible to be an MCK chief, and the opinions expressed were all well-grounded in culture and supported by positive examples. Yet, despite the range of opinion, the researchers found that a large majority of people who participated in the engagement sessions believe that a high school level education is a minimal criterion. The reason for this being that the role of an MCK chief today demands this minimal level of preparation due to the demands of the role in terms of literacy and technological capacity.



The discussions also brought forward a general agreement that the rules concerning eligibility should be adapted to bar candidates who were previously dismissed for ethical breaches. There was also a minority opinion expressed that the 50% blood quantum requirement should be omitted and eligibility for office on that issue should be brought in line with the Election Law's voting rules, which allows for participation of anyone on the Kahnawà:ke Kanien'kehá:ka Registry.

On the question of the composition of the Council of Chiefs, some community members expressed the opinion that the number of MCK chiefs should be reduced to nine.

Overall, there were strong and very constructive views expressed on the need to restructure the leadership selection process in the following ways:

- Those who intend to run for office should have access to a governance manual to familiarize themselves with the nature and expectations of the position
- The selection process should allow for community members to question candidates on their knowledge of the laws and the rules and procedures of the MCK system
- The timeframe and process for leadership selection should be changed to allow for a more in-depth engagement between candidates and community members

Open Forums

Two open forum events were held as part of the public engagement process, both of which were structured as safe spaces for dialogue and as collaborations between the MCK Governance Project and Kahnawà:ke's Collective Impact working group. The forums were held, in accordance with COVID Taskforce guidelines, outdoors in the green space next to the Golden Age Club with tents and chairs, and with lunch provided. The discussions were hosted and facilitated by Gerald Taiaiake Alfred, Linda Delormier and Jessica Lazare.

Several ideas were presented by participants on the central theme of the movement towards restoring traditional governance in Kahnawà:ke. These ideas include:

- The idea of reciprocal accountability, and the need to respect and be answerable to each other
- Forming safe spaces for public dialogue that minimize and manage conflictual behaviours
- Upholding our social and cultural responsibilities an Onkwehonwe
- Overcoming the divisions in the community caused by labels
- Fostering relationships to overcome historical divisions between groups and families
- Recognizing the impacts of colonial traumas and continuing the process of healing on all levels

This concept of division was brought forward by participants in reference to the relationships we have with one another. The group discussions explored the idea of forming safe spaces for better communication, without judgment, and building better relationships that embody the values of respect and honesty. Social anxiety was also noted to be a factor in people not feeling safe to explore personal viewpoints and it was also expressed that this may be due to shame and lateral violence caused by intergenerational trauma.

Constructive dialogue is seen as a key to Kahnawà:ke's future, and it was noted that the community needs to acknowledge differences of opinion, find a way past them, and steer our future away from conflict always arising from differences of opinion or beliefs. The opinion that there is now a stronger community effort to come to one mind was shared amongst the group. However, there was a lingering skepticism of our community's ability to break from the constructs and identities that are rooted in the labels, and political or social backgrounds of



our colonized past. There was a common perception in both forums that there is a need for more safe spaces and an on-going, consistent process for community members and leaders to talk together about these issues.

There was a prominent focus on the need for healing which addresses the impacts of trauma on individuals, families and the collective, and the importance of unity. It was clearly expressed that acknowledging our histories, applying our Kanien'kehá:ka traditional culture and teachings, and understanding trauma and the importance of healing both individually and collectively, are pressing needs. In particular, the relational component of our cultural heritage and in Haudenosaunee teachings was highlighted as a significant resource for people to use to overcome the struggles we presently face as a community, and there were insights shared about beginning the healing process in each of our own homes. The discourse of healing carried the idea of social responsibility and significance of cultivating better relationships so that we are more willing and able to help one another on our collective healing journey.

Also, youth involvement in public life was noted as vital to the future of the community, with educational efforts discussed as essential investments in our young people. With all of this came the conversation about connection to identity, not oriented towards defining community or individual identities, but about how everyone can discover their own connections to our shared cultural heritage and define their own place and identity within the collective. There was also reference to the clan system, in the context of utilizing the traditional system to ensure that voices are heard, and consensus is established.

Recommendations

The following recommendations have been made to the MCK Council of Chiefs:

Recommendation #1

Adopt a Code of Conduct that covers MCK chiefs' professional conduct, political and financial conflicts of interest, and procedures for lodging complaints about MCK chiefs.

Recommendation #2

Review and publicly report on the job performance of each MCK chief on an annual basis.

Recommendation #3

Require candidates for MCK chief to have a high school level education and organizational experience.

Recommendation #4

Restructure community meetings in the following ways:

- Restore meetings to monthly schedule
- Implement an in-the-round format for the physical space of the meeting
- Record, broadcast on television and online, and archive meetings
- Allow community members to submit items to be discussed during meetings
- Ensure that an expert facilitator is available to support the Grand Chief at meetings



Recommendation #5

Change the English name for an MCK “Chief” to a title that better reflects the role and authority of that position and the meaning of the *Kanien’keha* word currently used within the system (*ie/ratsénhaiens*).

Recommendation #6

Establish an Office of the Ombudsperson that is politically independent and legally empowered to receive and investigate complaints from members of the community about the professional conduct of MCK chiefs and the administration of the MCK programs and services, and to investigate allegations of wrongdoing and reprisal brought forward by current and former MCK employees.

The Office should be structured as a safe space guaranteeing confidentiality and serve the following functions:

- Listening, assessing, and responding to enquiries and complaints from the community
- Educating community members and organizations about professional ethics and fairness
- Conducting thorough, impartial, and independent investigations of complaints
- Resolving complaints and recommending improvements to policies, procedures, and practices
- Reporting publicly to bring attention to emerging issues of governance impacting Kahnawà:ke
- Engaging the community on concerns related to political issues and the functions of the MCK

Recommendation #7

Engage the community, especially youth, to educate people about the history of colonization and intergenerational traumas, provide information about the role and function of the MCK, and to design a clear vision and concrete plan of action with respect to the mandate to return to a traditional government.

Recommendation #8

Implement changes to Kahnawà:ke law and MCK rules and policies to reflect the findings of this process.

Letter to the Community from the Research Team

Shé:kon sewakwé:kon,

We would like to sincerely thank everyone who took the time to participate in the community engagement process. The success of our work depended on every one of you who made the time in your busy lives to meet with us and share your experiences, thoughts and insights. We are humbled by the passion people have for ensuring the unity, strength and well-being of Kahnawà:ke, and were awed by how much people were willing to go beyond the stated goals of this phase of our work by opening your hearts and expressing your hopes and visions for the long-term future of our community. We are overcome with gratitude for those who invited us into their homes to discuss the project with their families, and it was a privilege to share time and space and food with you all and to have had the deep and wise conversations that flowed from our get togethers.

This experience has proven to be an exceptional one for us, and we are richer in knowledge and confidence for having been gifted the knowledge and wisdom that was shared with us through your own personal stories and perspectives. It was an honour to get to meet and know everyone who showed an interest in the project. We will never forget your teachings, and we are excited to share what we have learned and to continue this journey of learning and rebuilding our community to reflect our people's ancestral vision. It was more than work for us, it was an experience that we truly enjoyed, and one that has given us a deeper understanding of who we are as a community and of this place we call home. This project was important for us on a personal level, and we cannot thank the community enough for trusting in us to ensure that your voices were heard throughout this process.

Niawenkowa,

Gerald Taiaiake Alfred and Jessica Lazare

