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Research Article

Multi-Level Governance for Renewable Energy Development in Nunavut: The Role of Community Consultation and Inuit Knowledge

Anna Soer*

Abstract: This study pertains to the governance of renewable energy development in Nunavut. Despite the strong environmental and security risks posed by diesel use and dependency, the development of renewable energy in the territory is slow. As domestic, regional, and international actors are moving toward decarbonizing energy infrastructure, the energy transition of Nunavut is facing structural obstacles ranging from the costs associated with modernizing and decarbonizing the energy grid, to human capacity constraints. In what ways are community consultation practices and Inuit Knowledge embedded in renewable energy decision making in Nunavut, and how effective are they under Nunavut, Canadian, and international frameworks? As global attention is veering towards the Arctic, with strong emphasis on mining potential, the global energy transition becomes an opportunity for Inuit rights holders to develop local economies and livelihood opportunities, as well as invest in their own energy security needs. Since the signing of the Nunavut Lands and Resources Devolution Agreement in 2024, the cascading security threats of diesel dependency have become intertwined with needs to develop industries supporting the territory's energy transition. As such, through a qualitative content analysis of grey literature and seventeen interviews with key stakeholders and rights holders in Nunavut, this study offers insight into the governance of renewable energy infrastructure development in Nunavut.

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Introduction

As global attention is veering towards the Arctic, with strong emphasis on mining potential, the global energy transition becomes an opportunity for Inuit rights holders to develop local economies and livelihood opportunities as well as invest in their own energy security needs. Indeed, diesel generators are increasingly obsolete, and frequent oil spills as well as blackouts strongly threaten the energy and environmental security (thereby also food security) of Nunavut. Since the signing of the Nunavut Lands and Resources Devolution Agreement in 2024 (which devolved Crown lands and resources to the Government of Nunavut), the cascading security threats of diesel dependency have become intertwined with the need to develop industries capable of supporting the territory's energy transition. As regional, national, and international actors move to decarbonize energy infrastructure, including the development of renewable energy for their grids, the energy transition in Nunavut is facing structural obstacles that range from costs associated with modernizing and decarbonizing the grid, to human capacity constraints.

This study pertains to the governance of renewable energy development in Nunavut. In what ways are community consultation practices and Inuit Knowledge embedded in renewable energy decision making in Nunavut? How effective are they under Nunavut, Canadian, and international frameworks? The study aims to better understand the operationalization of (i) Canadian frameworks for community consultation, Inuit Knowledge, and energy development; (ii) Nunavut-based frameworks supporting Inuit-led and Inuit-owned development; and (iii) international legal and policy frameworks related to the rights of Indigenous Peoples and sustainable development. The goal of the article is not to offer a roadmap on how to include Inuit Knowledge, but to reflect on the instrumentalization of Inuit Knowledge by organizations that highlight Inuit Knowledge as a key value and way of doing.

This research involved thematic content analysis of interviews with seventeen Nunavut stakeholders and right holders, and of relevant grey literature. The results show differences in (i) federal language versus territorial language; (ii) the stated policy of centring Inuit Knowledge versus its implementation; and (iii) the theory of community consultation based on the duty to consult and the free, prior and informed consent frameworks versus its implementation in federal and territorial policy on resource and energy development. These tensions between the federal, the territorial, and intra-territorial, showcase how pockets of Inuit self-determination in energy security and development become tools of resistance against colonial imposition.

Literature Review

Cherniak et al. (2015) examine the development of renewable energy solutions in northern and Arctic Canada and, through analysis of several projects, they suggest that the success of new technology deployment is tied to community consultation. The authors recommend further research (Cherniak et al., 2015, p. 129, 146; see also Simon, 2009; Arctic Council , 2021), specifically on community consultation that was missing for the 2016 federal moratorium on offshore oil and gas licensing in Arctic waters, and the European Union seal-product import ban (Peter et al., 2002). Literature is emerging on the topic of community involvement and the renewable energy industry in Nunavut; however, a strong focus remains on analyzing the industry in terms of energy security and climate change mitigation (Cambou & Poelzer, 2021; Hansen & Moe, 2022; Höysniemi, 2022; McDonald & Pearce, 2013; Trembath et al., 2022).

While extensive literature reviews and research on pan-Indigenous leadership in renewable energy development exist (Datta et al., 2024; Hoicka et al., 2021; Société Makivik, 2021; The Wah-ila-toos Indigenous Council, 2024), since renewable energy development in Nunavut is relatively new, there is little such analysis for the Arctic. However, McDonald and Pearce (2013) highlight Nunavut communities' support for the development of several renewable energy technologies in their communities (while opposing hydroelectricity), and the authors suggest stronger community consultation policies to bridge perceived gaps in the public's knowledge about these technologies. Now, twelve years after the publication of this research, community consultation policies implemented by Inuit-owned private enterprises, such as the Nunavut Nukkiksautiit Corporation (NNC), are in agreement with not only McDonald and Pearce's findings, but also with territorial and federal law and policies on community involvement. However, a lack of conceptual clarity emerges when defining community involvement: what it is, what it entails, and how it is operationalized.

The term "consultation" describes activities where a local population's input is sought or required before a development project is approved to move forward. However, in the case of NNC the consultation process instead involves an "engagement" process, where NNC not only seeks insights from the community on a proposed project or issue, but gives decision-making powers to the community for the project's approval (Nunavut Nukkiksautiit Corporation, 2022).

The concept of consultation has received criticism for not offering fundamental change, but rather only a seat at the back of the table—this is in contrast with engagement processes that include co-design and co-production, which are embedded in the larger processes of reconciliation as well as the

devolution of decision-making powers and redefining the narrative on Indigenous self-determination and development (Arnstein, 1969; Baker & Westman, 2018; Lajoie-O'Malley et al., 2023; Moore et al., 2017; Slay & Penny, 2014). Indigenous self-determination is here understood within the framework of Nunavut's devolution agreement with the federal government, as well in the anchoring of Inuit values and knowledge in energy development. Community consultation, in the context of energy development, becomes a tool for the realization of self-determination, redefining power relations in decision-making processes.

Defining sustainability in an Arctic context requires foregrounding an Inuit vision of how sustainability is articulated within this context. Echoing Banerjee's critique of sustainable development as a reinvention of colonialism (2002, 2003), and Frandy's (2021) and Normann's (2021) critiques of its application within a Sámi context, the concept of "sustainability" carries with it a colonial legacy. Within an ethics of relationality in reassigning Inuit self-determination to the forefront of territorial energy development, existing academic and grey literature suggest there is a further need to establish conceptual clarity on not only community involvement but also on the effective incorporation of Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit (IQ) (Inuit values, knowledge, behaviour, perceptions, and expectations) into renewable energy development processes (Nunavut Culture and Heritage, n.d.; Nunavut Impact Review Board, n.d.). On a similar note, more attention is needed to the nuances and applicability of the energy transition in Nunavut as well as to how communities have the capacity and opportunity to determine the shape of this energy transition—if it is even applicable at all. It is in this space that the dynamics of energy transition and diversification, combined with community engagement processes and the centring of Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit, appear to be a critical knowledge gap in current Arctic energy research.

Indeed, while great emphasis is put on the energy transition—the green transition—as a fundamental piece of climate change mitigation action as well as environmental and health safeguarding in the Canadian Arctic, the green transition has received scathing critiques with Sámi leaders criticizing the imposition of renewable energy infrastructure on their lands as "green colonialism" (Fjellheim, 2022; Frandy, 2021; Normann, 2021).

In Canada, the energy transition has been federally incentivized, as previously highlighted. An energy transition in Nunavut, however, remains critically combined with concerns of reliability and affordability (Nunavut, 2025; Pepa, 2016; Pinto & Gates, 2022). As such, in response to those concerns of reliability and affordability, a more nuanced approach of energy diversification—instead of transition—is being advocated as a realistic path forward for the territory (Barnes, 2023; Byrne, 2018; Cambou & Poelzer, 2021; Soer, 2024).

Economically, oil and gas production in Nunavut is not seen as a promising industry, despite the territory holding estimates of 18 billion barrels of oil and 181 trillion cubic feet of natural gas, due to prohibitively high costs of infrastructural development—both in terms of human capacity and physical infrastructure including the lack of accessibility since there are no roads in Nunavut (Canada Energy Regulator, 2024; Nunavut Economic Development and Transportation, 2017; Pinto & Gates, 2022; Soer, 2024).

The mining industry—including for the critical minerals necessary for renewable energy infrastructure—is confronted with similar issues of human capacity and accessibility constraints, putting a damper on the mining potential of the territory (Ritsema, 2014). Nunavut has four operational mines producing gold and iron, and three critical mineral exploration projects in the Kitikmeot and Kivalliq regions looking to develop the mining of zinc, copper, silver, lead, gold, nickel, palladium, platinum, and cobalt (CIRNAC et al., 2024; NWT & Nunavut Chamber of Mines, 2021). The Nunavut land use plan will determine the realization of critical minerals mining.

Environmental concerns have been paramount for local communities. As such, according to the 2021 Draft Nunavut Land Use Plan and the 2023 Recommended Nunavut Land Use Plan, 19% of land is under limited use (up from the 15% of the 2016 draft land use plan), meaning that there are year-round limitations and prohibitions on one or more types of land use; 12% is under conditional use with seasonal prohibitions on particular activities; and mixed use comprises 65% of the land, which means no prohibited uses or conformity requirements (Nunavut Planning Commission, 2021, 2023; Tranter, 2023; Venn, 2021). This draft plan would therefore mean that 22% of Nunavut would not be open to mining or other resource development. For the long-term development of renewable energy, this further pushes back the development potential of homegrown industries in the energy sector (Antunes, 2023; NWT & Nunavut Chamber of Mines, 2021). While the mining sector has received a lot of opposition and criticism regarding its detrimental environmental impacts and at times violent social impacts (Kunuk, 2019; Pauktuutit et al., 2014), Nunavut Member of Parliament Lori Idlout's comment for the *Nunatsiaq News* regarding the Land Use Plan draft exemplifies the growing tensions in the territory between environmental protection and economic viability: "I'm leaning towards becoming anti-mining, but I know how important critical minerals are for the functioning of our societies" (Antunes, 2023).

The development of renewable energy in the Arctic is thereby at the crux of the interplay between domestic and global forces (including international actors from foreign states to the private sector), which are placing Nunavut into this enmeshment of interests. Yet, while the mining industry—critical for the energy

sector for both fossil fuels and renewables—is heavily criticized in Nunavut by Nunavummiut, renewable energy solutions are increasing in popularity among the same general population. This duality anchors Nunavut again in the larger critique of green growth, as seen above, where the vast majority of mineral production will not be for domestic use, yet the territory will bear the brunt of its environmental and human impacts.

The literature on renewable energy development in Nunavut and elsewhere in the Arctic focuses largely on energy security and the green transition. However, the interconnection with the mining sector, and the reality of continued fossil fuel use for the foreseeable future pointing towards energy diversification, take a back seat and seem to operate in separate realms of research. It is within this complex insular literature on resource development that the triad of energy transition and diversification, community involvement processes, and the application of Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit is here explored. In what ways are community consultation practices and Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit embedded in renewable energy decision making in Nunavut, and how effective are they under Nunavut, Canadian, and international frameworks?

Research Design and Methods

This study involved content analysis of interviews with seventeen stakeholders and rights holders, as well as content analysis of grey literature. Thematic content analysis (Neuendorf, 2018; Vaismoradi et al., 2016) dives into key themes that are extracted from interviews and the literature to form the foundation of the analysis: In what ways are community consultation practices and Inuit Knowledge embedded in renewable-energy decision making in Nunavut, and how effective are they under Nunavut, Canadian, and international frameworks? The literature was chosen based on relevancy. The government policy documents and legislation were chosen based on their applicability and relevancy for the context of energy development in Nunavut. The interviews were conducted in Iqaluit and virtually during the spring of 2024, and ranged bewteen unstructured and semi-structured. Respondents included employees and representatives from circumpolar development organizations Inuit organizations, Inuit territorial and local governments, and federal government and northern agencies; scholars on Arctic affairs; and local residents. The individuals were chosen based on their professional capacity or, in the case of local residents, based on consumer interest in renewable energy development in their community. The diverse pool of respondents enabled a comprehensive view on energy development in the territory. While the interviews were mostly conducted in Iqaluit, the professionals responded to the interests of the whole territory and were not limited to their jurisdiction or to Iqaluit. An exception was a local government representative who brought in the municipal perspective. The questionnaires were adapted based on the individuals, as well as their responses to the conversation. This allowed adding modifying questions to better reflect the ongoing conversation.

For community members, the core questions were formulated as such: What do you think about renewable energy in general? What do you think about renewables for your community? And do you feel that you are heard or that you have a say in the energy policy of the town? These three questions were formulated to leave plenty of space for the respondent to take the conversation in multiple directions. These questions aimed to juxtapose local residents' perceptions of renewable energy with how they imagine their own community's energy future as well as how they relate to local decision makers regarding energy development. These questions aimed to highlight either continuity or discrepancy in respondents' perceptions of renewables both in a hypothetical larger context and in the specific context of their community. The questions also aimed to spark conversation on governance proximity between local residents and local/territorial and federal decision makers.

For individuals interviewed in their professional capacity, the questionnaires were adapted to the individual's position. However, key themes remained: application of both the law and of development policies whether territorial, federal, or international; inclusion or foregrounding of Inuit Knowledge and community consultation; relations between the public sector and the private sector; capacity constraints including engagement fatigue and staffing issues; as well as other social inclusion markers, such as gender, in energy development. These questions aimed to provide insight by highlighting multi-level governance within the territory and in relation with the federal government using domestic and international frameworks; in relations between sectors and the local population; and in the dynamics of inclusion in community consultation. This methodology allowed for direct insights into the perspectives of decision makers and rights holders through a multi-scale approach. Choosing both interview methodology and content analysis of relevant policy documents enabled confronting policy with the lived realities of decision makers and rights holders. The methodology also enabled insights into the lived realities, especially on the meaningful incorporation of Inuit Knowledge.

The thematic analysis of the interviews and literature was conducted manually by extracting recurrent vocabulary or recurrent remarks within their context. It is logical that a question on engagement fatigue, for instance, would spark an answer containing the term engagement fatigue many times throughout the conversation. This does not mean that engagement fatigue is a determinant factor in shaping

operationalization of energy development policies. This thematic analysis hence used a qualitative approach that both contextualized the content and provided informative insights into respondents' perceptions and understandings of renewable energy development in Nunavut.

The results of this analysis are shown using word clouds (see Figure 1 and Figure 2). The choice of word clouds responds to two imperatives. The first is that the visualization of word clouds enables a clearer understanding of key words as an ensemble. In short, word clouds enable a context, a landscape, to emerge out of textual analysis, that a simple table would not necessarily allow. In this regard, the word cloud supports the content analysis by offering a clear contextual visualization of the data. Second, the simplicity of a word cloud enables a clearer communication of research findings. Indeed, this study was conducted with respect for communicating results in a plain language format to the community members who participated in the research. Word clouds enable, in a clear and succinct way, the communication of research findings in a fun and interactive way (DePaolo & Wilkinson, 2014; Henderson & Segal, 2013).

Results

Thematic Content Analysis of Interviews

The interviews indicated a prevalence of interlinkages between people and their community, work, and development, as well as climate change in the Arctic and knowledge production (see word cloud of most prevalent terms in Figure 1). "Climate change" appeared 38 times, "community" 98 times (its plural appeared 65 times), and "work" and "development" 72 and 64 times respectively. "Knowledge" appeared 73 times and "people" 131 times. "Inuit" appeared 97 times. Given that the topic of the study was community engagement and the inclusion of Inuit Knowledge in renewable energy development, the results for community, energy, Inuit, and knowledge are not surprising. The Qulliq Energy Corporation (QEC) appeared 51 times, as a main actor responsible for energy development in the territory, as it is responsible for the grid. The Government of Nunavut (GN) appeared 24 times.

Respondents correlated the topic of renewable energy development with wider conversations on climate change and energy diversification. Energy diversification was, however, preferred over energy transition. As one respondent working for an Inuit organization remarked, "Don't force anybody to stop driving a fuel car. […] I support anybody who wants solar and windmill, but for all the community to rely on solar, wind, tidal … don't force anybody into that." However, another respondent from the federal government highlighted the need for better public education on energy diversification and renewable energy technologies: "There is no literacy on windmills and solar, the opportunities for misunderstandings are high. These are very new concepts. […] How do we transition? What are the tools in our toolbox and meet the needs of the community?"

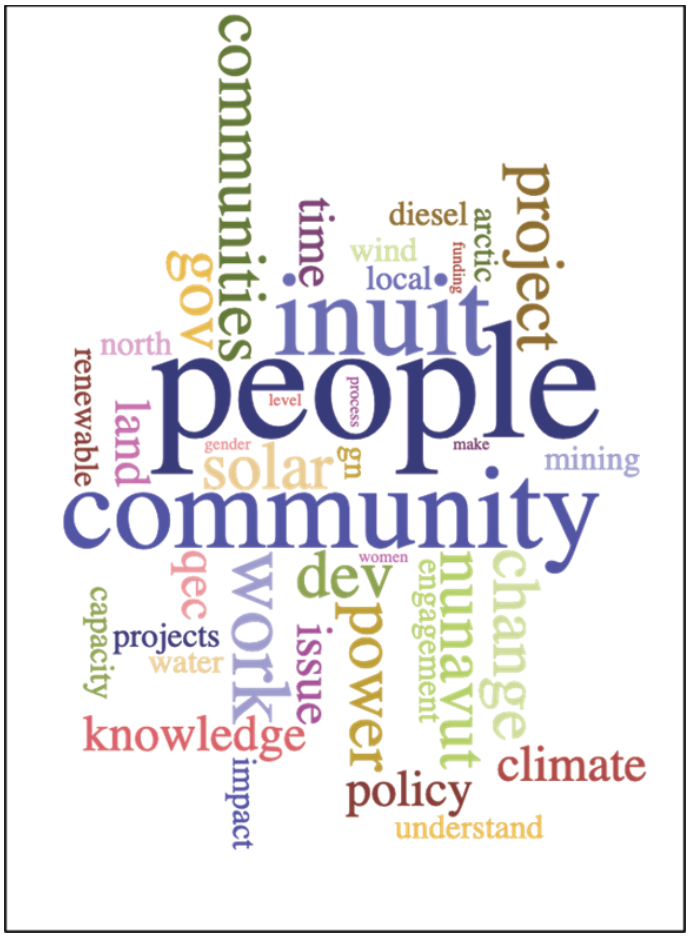

Figure 1. Word cloud representing the 40 most prevalent words in a content analysis of 17 interviews conducted in 2024 with Nunavut stakeholders and rights holders discussing renewable energy. Source: Author.

On policy and intergovernmental relations, one respondent working for an Inuit organization described the flow of information and policy making as a "top-down funnel of information" where "Southerners" come into the Nunavut energy landscape lacking insider knowledge and look to include Inuit Knowledge after the fact: "Don't add in IQ [Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit], use IQ" (Inuit organization respondent).

On energy transition, decaying infrastructure was mentioned repeatedly. One respondent from the federal government recognized the challenges the energy corporation QEC faces in the maintenance of old generators, as they "can't keep technicians." One community member reminded about the dependency on generators: "We can't totally go to renewables, because the sun sets and wind stops. We still need generators but we can be more economical in how much diesel we use." A respondent from the energy sector responded by acknowledging the risks posed by an aging infrastructure: "We are continually preoccupied keeping the lights on. There are 25 communities with aging diesel generators," which incentivizes the development of "ways to lower carbon footprint." Relations with the federal government were here once again highlighted: "Everyone wants to get away from diesel. But newer generation diesel [generator] is much cleaner in terms of noise pollution and amount of energy per litre of fuels. We're trying to communicate that to federal partners." "Appropriate balance," as mentioned by this respondent, was a running theme where virtually all respondents were not yet considering full energy transition. While the cabin program, which subsidizes the installation of solar panels on hunting and fishing cabins on the land, is very popular and mentioned by many respondents who engage in hunting, a full transition away from fossil fuels was not considered by the respondents: "You can't just switch a generator out. You need electricity at all times" (federal government respondent). As such, key barriers to local and territorial adoption were framed according to structural capacity constraints: the need for qualified labour and the need for reliable and affordable energy formed the key criticisms against widespread adoption of renewable energy solutions.

On community consultation and consultation dynamics, some respondents highlighted the lack of consultation by actors in Nunavut, as one federal government respondent mentioned: "QEC hasn't engaged well with communities. [They face] challenges with infrastructure, old generators […] QEC could do a lot better" (federal government respondent). Virtually all respondents highlighted the importance of "community needs and preferences" (Inuit organization respondent) where "regional Inuit organizations have that connection to their communities and responsibility for their communities" as opposed to the federal government, which is not often at the table "going deep in with the communities" (Inuit organization respondent). Local residents also remarked on the need for better consultation from the government: "The government does consultation once in a while but there's not enough consultation I don't think so. I haven't seen environmental impact assessments. It's going very slowly, I wish it was faster" (community member). Many respondents highlighted the apparent disconnect between southern Canadian and federal imperatives, and northern realities: "If I'm coming to the community with something that is southern, I get a southern response. When I do something that is northern, I get a northern response" (local government respondent).

Community consultation was often linked with the use and foregrounding of Inuit Knowledge, which, however, was confronted with a polarized reception, between instrumentalization and decolonization. Inuit Knowledge was described variously as a "buzzword" with "good intentions" (federal government respondent), as a "priority" (federal government respondent), as "more than simple statements" and "informing" institutional workings (Inuit organization respondent), or even as "red tape" where the more senior the position, the less it may or may not be incorporated (local government respondent). Inuit Knowledge was also described as a way to serve teamwork in combating engagement fatigue and capacity issues (local government respondent). The issue of passing knowledge from Elders to youth amidst climate change was mentioned, where the ancestral knowledge "being passed may no longer be applicable" (territorial government respondent).

The use of Inuit Knowledge, or Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit, also varies conceptually where respondents used the terms "local knowledge" and "traditional knowledge" interchangeably. While the incorporation of "traditional local knowledge" was seen as "tricky," a federal government respondent raised questions: "where does the boundary lie?" between traditional local knowledge and Indigenous Knowledge, especially in the context of circumpolar collaborations? Local knowledge was also used by community members to highlight the importance of local engagement in territorial development (local community respondent). Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit was seen as a tool for "local mapping of impacts" used for future development (Inuit organization respondent).

Specifically on community consultation, gender was mentioned 30 times by the respondents. The inclusion of gender on the topic of renewable energy development ranged from non-existent (the Inuit organization respondent and the local government respondent), to its inclusion at the administrative level, but not at the project level (the Inuit-owned energy sector respondent), to its inclusion at the discursive level but not at the project level (another Inuit-owned energy sector respondent). On gender, some respondents highlighted that current priorities lie more on the "better inclusion of Inuit perspective, IQ, and how do we adapt the way we work with culturally appropriate manners?" (territorial government respondent). This inclusion of Inuit perspectives related directly to

larger dynamics of high turnover (circumpolar development sector respondent, community member respondent) and engagement fatigue (Inuit organization respondent, local government respondent, territorial government respondent), which was also described as "over-engagement" (local government respondent). While engagement fatigue, as described either as a result of high turnover or over-engagement, is prominently recognized by most respondents, a local government respondent and a circumpolar development sector respondent challenged the notion of engagement fatigue, observing that "Anywhere in the world you have vacant positions. It doesn't matter if you have 100 or 20 staff, as long as you have the environmental situation where it is calm, happy, and [where you] like what you are doing and get work done (local government respondent)." The other respondent also challenged the notion as "fatigue is not giving agency to people. It's more an issue of capacity, or the turnover. It's going back to the issue of education" (circumpolar development sector respondent).

Overall, interview respondents gave critical insights into the state of the inclusion of Inuit Knowledge, into community consultation dynamics, and into the reception of renewable energy at the federal–territorial relations level, at the territorial level, and at the local municipal level by both professionals and community members. While responses ranged, there was some consensus on the possibilities of energy diversification as well as the importance of incorporating local Inuit Knowledge into regional development, despite the recognition that it is not necessarily meaningfully done.

Thematic Content Analysis of Grey Literature

The grey literature documents were chosen for their ability to show the vertical and horizontal governance dynamics between actors relevant to energy development in Nunavut—the federal government, the Nunavut territorial government, the energy sector, international frameworks and institutions, and Inuit rights organizations. This analysis of vertical and horizontal governance serves to uncover the dynamics behind the framing and operationalization of renewable energy development in Nunavut under local, federal, and international policy frameworks. The documents analyzed included the following:

- Nunavut Lands and Resources Devolution Agreement, co-signed by the Government of Nunavut, Nunavut Tunngavik Incorporated, and the Government of Canada (Canada et al., 2024);
- United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples Act Action Plan (UNDA), which sets out how Canada will implement the federal United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples Act (Justice Canada, 2023);
- United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (United Nations, 2015);
- Inuit Nunangat Policy (Inuit–Crown Partnership Committee, 2022)
- Canada's Arctic and Northern Policy Framework (CIRNAC, 2019)
- Pan-Territorial Growth Strategy of the Canadian Northern Economic Development Agency (CanNor, 2019);
- Wildlife Act, 2003;
- the Arctic Energy Fund (under the Canada–Nunavut Integrated Bilateral Agreement signed in 2018); and
- Kinship and Prosperity: Proven Solutions for a Clean Energy Landscape Report (Wah-ila-toos Indigenous Council, 2024).

The term "Indigenous" appeared 1,335 times across the legal and policy documents, "Arctic" appeared 719 times, "wildlife" appeared 583 times, "development" appeared 578 times, "peoples" 562 times, "sustainable" 337 times, "respect" 540 times, and "rights" 468 times. The term "public" appeared 263 times across all documents. See word cloud of most prevalent terms in Figure 2. Each document, however, through the central vocabulary utilized, emphasizes different themes. Across documents, there is some continuity in the emphasis on development. As several documents pertain to agreements made between the federal government and the territorial government, the notion of partnership is equally present. Similarly, documents relating to northern development such as the Inuit Nunangat Policy and the Arctic and Northern Policy Framework emphasize self-determination, treaty rights, and Indigenous rights. Territorial documents such as the Wildlife Act (2003) similarly lay down the importance of Inuit harvesting rights: "wildlife management should be an effective system that complements Inuit harvesting rights and priorities, recognizes Inuit systems of wildlife management that contribute to the conservation of wildlife and protection of habitat, and recognizes the need for an effective role for Inuit in all aspects of wildlife management" (Wildlife Act, 2003, s. 1(2)(m)).

The centring of the Inuit way of life, world view, and knowledge is echoed across the corpus, albeit in different ways depending on jurisdiction and intent. While the Wildlife Act, the Bilateral Agreement, the UNDRIP Action Plan (UNDA), and the Lands and Resources Devolution Agreement are law—thereby utilizing legal terminology—the other documents (the Arctic and Northern Policy Framework, the Kinship and Prosperity recommendations, the Inuit Nunangat Policy, and CanNor's Pan-Territorial Growth Strategy) serve as indicators of policy intent and engage the responsibilities of parties involved in taking these recommendations and roadmaps to enaction either through programs or through law. The Wah-ila-toos Indigenous Council's Kinship and Prosperity recommendations report (KPR) is supported by the legal framework of UNDA, itself based on the United

Nations Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP). UNDA thereby implements concepts recognized by UNDRIP, such as free, prior, and informed consent. This enactment aligns national frameworks with international guidelines pertaining to Indigenous consultation and engagement rights. The Pan-Territorial Growth Strategy, while not directly mentioning free, prior and informed consent or the duty to consult, does mention their funding mechanism through "coordinating federal participation in regulatory review processes and Crown consultation with Indigenous peoples for major resource and infrastructure projects in order to maximize the collective benefits" (CanNor, 2019, p. 7)

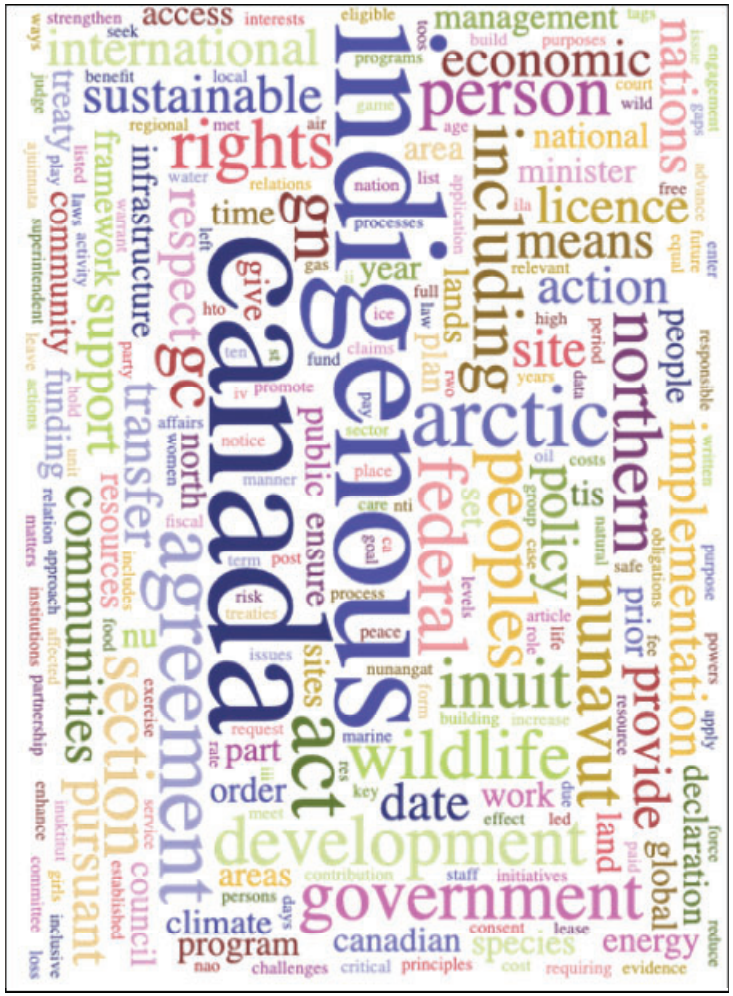

Figure 2. Word cloud illustrating most prevalent terms found through content analysis of all selected grey literature. Source: Author.

While the Wildlife Act and the Kinship and Prosperity Report (KPR) foreground Indigenous self-determination and Treaty rights, the Arctic and Northern Policy Framework repeatedly emphasizes the partnership with Indigenous Peoples and the priorities of Indigenous Peoples through a nationalizing discourse of "our Arctic": "Building on these new partnerships, the ANPF provides a long term foundation for transformative change, benefiting our Arctic, its Indigenous peoples, northern residents and all Canadians" (Canada, 2019, p. 8). Thereby, federal and territorial jurisdictional powers are clarified throughout the policies: while the sovereignty of the federal state is emphasized and reinforced, partnerships with Indigenous nations and communities are encouraged. Canada's Arctic and Northern Policy Framework (ANPF) and Nunavut's Wildlife Act, while serving very different purposes in different contexts, showcase the continuous balancing act of power dynamics between territorial self-determination and federal jurisdiction, where the verticalization of power—meaning the reinforcement of colonial power dynamics through policy—is challenged through horizontal legal channels in bilateral and territorial agreements. Documents written through Indigenous priorities and documents written through government administrative priorities thereby differ in their emphasis despite federal documents reiterating federal–Indigenous partnerships. Another difference in approach is the centring of Indigenous Knowledge—including language—in the Wildlife Act and the Kinship and Prosperity Report. As the KPR document emphasizes just transition through the free, prior and informed consent framework and through Indigenous leadership including Indigenous Knowledge, "which cannot, ever, be licenced or owned by the Government of Canada" (Wah-ila-toos Indigenous Council, 2024, p. 2), the Wildlife Act highlights Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit 13 times throughout the statute.

This foregrounding of Inuit Knowledge in the Lands and Resources Devolution Agreement is not present. Instead "Traditional Knowledge" is only mentioned once (Canada, Nunavut & NTI, 2024, p. 46); "Indigenous Knowledge" is also mentioned once (p. 59) where consultation with communities also appears, as well as once before (p. 41). Community consultation is only mentioned twice (p. 41, 59) in the document. The term gender only appears within a Canadian context in the Arctic and Northern Policy Framework (Canada, 2019, p. 39 in relation to sustainable development, pp. 47, 57, 60, 61, 65) and once in the KPR document (p. 3). The language difference between the Wildlife Act and the Lands and Resources Devolution Agreement showcase the epistemological disparities between an Act written by and for the Inuit and an Agreement written for the federal government. This was corroborated by an interview respondent from the local government: "[We] wanted to put in a place that Inuit Knowledge has to be in the [Wildlife] Act. Which of those knowledge can we include in the Act?

We [...] took the 8 guiding principles to work for other departments and took [the principles] into the government system. [It] was only supposed to be for the Wildlife Act but [they] took it for all."

With respect to energy, while the term does not appear in the Inuit Nunangat Policy, it does appear in the federal Arctic and Northern Policy Framework and Pan-Territorial Growth Strategy. Specifically, on energy diversification and transition, the two documents use the terms "green," "clean," "renewable," "alternative," and "bio-energy." The Arctic and Northern Policy Framework emphasizes non-fossil fuel energy while the strategy recognizes the economic weight and structural dependence on fossil fuel (p. 14). The two documents use the term "diversification" only in relation to economic diversification. While energy diversification or even transition is not explicitly mentioned, the development of "green," "clean," "renewable," or "alternative" energy sources is emphasized in both documents: "While the mining sector remains the cornerstone of territorial economies, new opportunities for growth are emerging across a diverse range of sectors including tourism, renewable energy, northern food sectors, commercial fisheries, and cultural and traditional sectors" (CanNor, 2019, p. 3); and "we will champion a number of circumpolar initiatives that support the development and deployment of green energy in Arctic and Northern communities, including initiatives related to exchanging knowledge and expertise on renewable and alternative energy technologies" (Canada, 2019, p. 69).

Notably, the ANPF calls to "Achieve energy security and sustainability in all communities and improve access to reliable, affordable and clean energy solutions" (p. 44). Such a call is consistent with international frameworks such as the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (2015). Under the Agenda, partnerships and properity are centred through the need to foreground the interests of people so as "to ensure that all human beings can fulfil their potential in dignity and equality and in a healthy environment" (UN, 2015, p. 2). Strong economic foundations (article 27); safety, resilience, and sustainability (article 7); or urban infrastructure development (article 15) form the core behind the Goal 7 of the Agenda for Sustainable Development. The Goal 7, "Ensure access to affordable, reliable, sustainable and modern energy for all" (p. 14), recalls closely the imperatives stated by Nunavut's power utility Qulliq Energy Corporation (QEC) and by the Government of Nunavut. Reliability and affordability specifically form central concerns. As such, there is a noticeable continuity in key themes between Canadian and international frameworks.

The domestic policy documents the Arctic and Northern Policy Framework and the Pan-Territorial Growth Strategy, written by the federal government, both envision the future of the Canadian Arctic and North, and both outline economic visions for the territories while maintaining jurisdictional boundaries—the Yukon and the Northwest Territories both have jurisdiction over their lands and resources at the time of publication of both documents. As such, while the specific terms of "energy diversification" or "energy transition" are not mentioned in the documents, non-fossil fuel energy is emphasized by language by the federal government. The CanNor Strategy document also mentions bio-energy as an alternative to diesel use in specific cases (p. 14). The Arctic Energy Fund (AEF) as stipulated under the Bilateral Agreement, however, explicitly calls for transition:

> A.4 Rural and Northern Communities Infrastructure
> a) Objective
> i. The rural and northern communities infrastructure stream will support Projects that improve the quality of life in rural and northern communities by responding to rural- and northern-specific needs.
> ii. This stream includes the Arctic Energy Fund, which will focus primarily on improving energy security through upgrading or replacing fossil fuel-based community energy systems and enhancing diesel transportation and supply in communities where connection to an electricity grid or relying solely on renewables as a source of energy is not a feasible solution. Finally, the Arctic Energy Fund will also support the transfer, in whole or in part, from fossil fuel-based systems to renewables.
> (Canada–Nunavut, 2018, p. 22)

Additionally, eligible AEF projects "must meet or exceed any applicable energy efficiency standards for buildings outlined in the Pan-Canadian Framework on Clean Growth and Climate Change" (p. 7). The document uses both "renewable" and "clean" to define qualifying energy types under the Fund (p. 17). The Lands and Resources Devolution Agreement addresses the development, conservation, and management of non-renewable natural resources (Canada, Nunavut & NTI, 2024, p. 26). On renewable energy development, QEC's Independent Power Producer Program enables "Integrating renewable energy systems in the territory's energy grid [and] helps decrease Nunavut's dependency on diesel fuel, enabling the corporation to reduce carbon emissions and promote energy self-reliance" (QEC, n.d.); it was previously not within the mandate of QEC to be able to integrate independently produced energy into its grids. While the Arctic and Northern Policy Framework mentions energy security once (p. 44), as does the Canada, Nunavut, and NTI Bilateral Agreement (p. 22), the Pan-Territorial Growth Strategy does not.

The thematic content analysis of the documents, juxtaposed with the thematic content analysis of the interviews, shows governance and policy trajectory dynamics between the territory and the federal government. While interview respondents emphasized the importance of community consultation and foregrounding of Inuit Knowledge—despite some difficulties therein—this emphasis does not appear in similar ways in the selected documents. The legal documents pertaining to energy development do not centre community consultation or Inuit Knowledge, but centre administrative processes pertaining to its management. Community consultation or Inuit Knowledge are only very rarely linked to the question of energy development. The policy documents also showcase a dissimilar discursive trend between federal documents and territorial documents—where federal documents highlight partnership and certain "buzzwords" like gender or renewable energy, and northern documents emphasize self-determination and Treaty rights, even when referring to energy. This analysis thereby demonstrates discursive realities constructing relations between the territorial government and the federal government as well as responding to international frameworks: one where priorities are struggling to find a common discourse, despite some alignment with international framing of energy as affordable, resilient, and sustainable.

Discussion

The thematic content analysis of the interview respondents and the selected grey literature both show a discrepancy between federal perceptions and priorities and territorial perceptions and priorities. The discrepancy between the Wildlife Act and the Lands and Resources Devolution Agreement illustrates the differences between the territorial government and the federal government, where Inuit Knowledge and community knowledge are foregrounded in starkly different ways. One aims at management for and by the Nunavummiut, while the other serves as guidelines in relation with the federal government. One is an Act, the other an Agreement. The interlinkages between community consultation and development, which were highlighted by the interview respondents, are not reflected in the documents with similar emphasis.

The disconnect, however, between the theory of foregrounding Inuit Knowledge—as acknowledged as essential by respondents and certain legal and policy documents—and its implementation, is apparent through the insights of the respondents. Describing Inuit Knowledge as "red tape," and the inability of several respondents to clearly articulate examples of the application of IQ within projects, demonstrates a gap between policy and practice. This gap demonstrates the tension between shaping a territory according to Inuit identity, values, customs, and knowledge, and being a territory with a federal—colonial—system. In this vein, the members of Nunavut Tunngavik Incorporated (NTI) passed a resolution in 2021 directing NTI to pursue Inuit self-government, criticizing the Government of Nunavut for absurdly defending "colonial policies, programs and services" through a "focus on the non-Inuit minority" (NTI, 2021). Former NTI President Aluki Kotierk defended the Nunavut Agreement and "the hope and dreams that was originally envisioned for Inuit and their future generations" (NTI, 2021), which entails a renewed conversation on self-government within a colonial paradigm.

Against a state-centric approach, the results point toward an ongoing power negotiation between federal imperatives and jurisdiction, and territorial self-determination and jurisdiction. In this, IQ and community consultation, to achieve social licence, act as performative. In order to achieve the public's acceptance of energy development trajectories, both for non-renewable and renewable energy, the apparent foregrounding of consent and IQ act as tools to craft an image akin to reconciliation between the federal government and the territorial government, as well as an image of democratic Inuit-focused efforts between the territorial government and the general population under the territory's Nunavut Act obligations.

Yet, it remains important to nuance the failure of effective operationalization of IQ and community consultation, as this would also, to repeat the words of one respondent critical of engagement fatigue, not be "giving agency to people." Dismissing community consultation and IQ just as tools under colonialism would strip these of any agency and their further potential for achieving self-determination. Neither would it correspond to the complex landscape of energy development in Nunavut where some companies, such as NNC, an Inuit-owned company, develop in-depth tools to support meaningful engagement. Neither would it show the ways that civil society is serving to protect Inuit interests in Nunavut through the work of organizations such as NTI, Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami (ITK), and Pauktuutit Inuit Women of Canada. In short, while Aluki Kotierk and the interview respondents highlight the co-optation of certain "buzzwords" and institutions meant to protect and serve Inuit communities, this does not flatten the complex landscape of energy development in the territory—it co-exists with pockets of agency. It could be argued that it is precisely this co-optation, the continuous danger of colonial erasure, that forces the existence of streams of resistance, of other ways of doing.

The operationalization of Canadian frameworks, including domestic legal frameworks, supporting Nunavut's self-determination, coupled with international policies, is thereby dual: while consultation and IQ are co-opted and meaningful implementation is lacking structurally, streams of agency in self-determination are finding ways to produce meaningful impact. The energy corporation's Independent

Power Producer Program, for instance, is the result of long-standing advocacy by Inuit-owned businesses such as Nunavut Nukkiksautiit Corporation to diversify the energy landscape of Nunavut while maintaining Inuit interests. In short, the renewable energy landscape of Nunavut, as seen through community consultation and IQ, is developing in tandem with both self-determination and continuous institutional colonial oppression. As such, this study provides research on renewable energy development in relation to community involvement processes and meaningful incorporation of Inuit Knowledge. It also highlights the lack of conceptual clarity of community involvement processes and therefore also shows the difficulties faced in meaningful implementation of Inuit Knowledge.

The Government of Nunavut and Inuit rights organizations Nunavut Tunngavik Inc. and Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami, have co-developed collaboration strategies to address security in general. Under the Nunavut Arctic Sovereignty and Security Strategy, released in September 2025 by the government and NTI, energy security is explicitly named as a key area for empowered decision making, especially in regard to critical mineral exploitation and the green energy transition (Nunavut & NTI, 2025, p. 3). Replacing diesel dependence is also highlighted by ITK as a key strategy with the federal government's Major Projects Office as announced in November 2025 (ITK, 2025).

The strategies espoused by the Government of Nunavut, NTI, and ITK align under the premise of securing energy as a tool for self-determination to ensure that, "In this time of growing geopolitical interest in the Arctic, we must ensure that sovereignty is not only asserted—but lived, secured, and shared in full partnership with those who call this land home" (Nunavut & NTI, 2025, p. 3). The emphasis on full partnership links strongly with the foregrounding of the duty to consult and the principle of free, prior and informed consent. Additionally, the Sovereignty and Security srategy addresses the importance of foregrounding IQ, and specifically "Avatittinnik Kamatsiarniq—our deep respect for the environment—and calls for action that protects both sovereignty and sustainability" (p. 4). It sees the inclusion of Inuit Knowledge as a "strategic advantage" (p. 20) and as part of a "fundamental shift" towards Inuit-led approaches and "partnership based on respect for Inuit rights, recognition of Inuit knowledge and leadership, and commitment to sustainable development that serves communities first while contributing to national goals" (p. 27).

The frameworks of the duty to consult and free, prior and informed consent, in conjunction with Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit, seek to guide energy-related decision-making processes between federal and territorial powers. However, their implementation remains asymmetrical between actors, where co-optation and the lack of meaningful incorporation thereby arise, resulting in engagement fatigue and overall discontent as reported by multiple respondents. It is within this navigation of power with the federal government that the Government of Nunavut similarly navigates priorities and interests within the territory. While Inuit organizations have criticized the Government of Nunavut as essentially reproducing colonial violence, the government's obligations remain explicit under the Nunavut Act to secure services for its constituents, despite facing ongoing structural challenges. In this sense, community consultation and IQ become tools used by Inuit civil society and the private sector, as well as by some departments within the Government of Nunavut, to engage the territorial government in fulfilling its obligations.

Conclusion

The ways that governments, civil society, community, and the private sector are implementing community consultation practices and Inuit Knowledge in renewable energy decision making in Nunavut, and their effectiveness, have been explored using thematic content analysis, to identify how interview respondents talk about, and how domestic and international policy and legal documents write about, these issues. Renewable energy development operates within a wider realm of resource development in Nunavut, which in turn is influenced by natural resource exploitation in the Arctic and self-determination dynamics under devolution.

Concerns of human and environmental sustainability domestically are echoed in international frameworks concerning the rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP, here analyzed under the Canadian UNDA), and sustainable development (the UN 2030 Agenda). Through conversations on sustainability, renewable energy development is anchored in larger restructuring efforts for how business is conducted and how relations with the federal government are framed in the Arctic. These larger restructuring efforts bring about conversations on community consultation, the place of Inuit Knowledge, and the operationalization of these policies calling for sustainable development.

The results of the thematic content analysis of both interviews and policy and legal documents have shown differences in (i) federal language versus territorial language, in (ii) the theory of centring Inuit Knowledge versus its implementation, and in (iii) the theory of community consultation, based in the duty to consult and the principle of free, prior and informed consent, versus its implementation in federal and territorial policies regarding resource and energy development. These tensions between the federal and the territorial—including discord within the territory—evolve within the context of colonial power dynamics between the actors. Energy self-determination becomes a tool of resistance against colonial imposition. The latest Arctic Security and Sovereignty Strategy published in 2025 by the Government of Nunavut and Nunavut Tunngavik Incorporated highlight the need for the foregrounding of local needs and Inuit leadership in

northern development, especially as applied to energy development, including the energy transition. As such, while momentum is building in favour of local self-determination, the discrepancy experienced on the ground as well as the discursive differences between federal interests and territorial interests need to be addressed to build meaningful relevance to enact truly sustainable change.

These findings add to the existing literature on community consultation in the Arctic and offer insight on the complex landscape of renewable energy development in Nunavut. The case of renewable energy development shows the complex ways the federal system—through devolution—influences the ways that development plays out locally. The devolution process influences the ways through which colonial imposition and Inuit agency compose with one another—between co-optation and self-determination.

Positionality: The author is originally from Brittany (France) and the Netherlands, and has lived in Canada since 2021.

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Commentary

The Arctic in Future Energy and Resource Security

Heather Exner-Pirot*

Abstract: The closure of oil production in Norman Wells marks the end of a historic chapter in Canadian Arctic resource development and underscores the economic realities shaping the region's future. While debates about Arctic oil and gas have often centred on climate policy and environmental opposition, the primary driver of development has always been global commodity prices and project economics. Arctic projects typically cost two to three times more than comparable developments in southern jurisdictions due to infrastructure gaps, high labour and transportation costs, and complex regulatory processes. Despite these challenges, the Arctic hosts world-class deposits of gold, diamonds, nickel, and iron ore, and currently supports several operating mines across the three territories. Large-scale Arctic oil and gas development is unlikely in the medium term, due to competition from other, cheaper sources. The near-term future of Arctic energy is therefore less about megaproject exports and more about strengthening local energy systems that can power communities and unlock the next generation of northern resource development.

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