

Commentary

Inuit, namiipita? Climate Change Research and Policy: Beyond Canada's Diversity and Equity Problem

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As an Inuk, born and raised in Iqaluit and academically trained in southern Canada,¹ I start my thoughts here with two notable questions that Mary Simon (2017), Minister Bennett's Special Representative in the cross-sectoral engagement for the new Arctic Policy Framework, kept returning to:

Why, in spite of substantive progress over the past 40 years, including remarkable achievements such as land claims agreements, Constitutional inclusion and precedent-setting court rulings, does the Arctic continue to exhibit among the worst national social indicators for basic wellness?

Why, with all the hard-earned tools of empowerment, do many individuals and families not feel empowered and healthy?²

In the same line of inquiry, I ask: *Inuit, namiipita?*³ Why, in spite of so much research and policy focus on Arctic climate change, are we Inuit still consultants or fillers in an otherwise Western-driven enterprise to "monitor" climate developments in Inuit Nunangat? This is not to

polarize North and South in the otherwise existential task we all have to tackle—climate change. Rather, I want to highlight that the story of climate change research and policy in Canada has so far been the familiar story of marginalization of Inuit in the national narrative; and that it is in Canada’s—indeed humanity’s—interests to have Inuit participate equally and with a sense of utmost urgency in the research and decision-making processes related to the Arctic. It goes beyond the diversity and equity rationale or the moral duty of reconciliation: we simply cannot afford to act differently.

The current sidelines to which Inuit have been relegated in Arctic research and policy is both the result and, dare I say, one of the perpetrating factors in the stalling of climate change research at the stage of “monitoring.” I fully support evidence-based policy-making and the role research has in collecting data. My point, though, is that the in situ capacity that Inuit have developed over millennia to observe, analyze, apply, and adapt to the changing northern environment is overlooked in the scientific race to research and document the environmental transformations taking place in our homelands. We need to turn to a pragmatic approach in the climate change fight. It starts locally, and it presupposes challenging the ongoing policy concerns with how to “validate” Inuit knowledge and science; it involves stepping out of the traditional research paradigm and instead directing substantive resources towards having Inuit as fully-fledged, distinct researchers and decision makers.

Inuit are part of the northern ecosystem, a perspective that speaks to the interdisciplinary and holistic nature of Inuit *Qaujimaqatugangit* (IQ) and way of being as a people in this part of the world.⁴ As such, they are at the centre of the looming environmental crisis and need to be at the centre of the way forward—for everybody’s sake. Temperatures in the Arctic are increasing and are projected to continue warming in the future.⁵ At the very least, this means unpredictable weather and disruptions in the melting and freezing cycles and in the vegetation patterns. This is an environmental change already unfolding at full speed, with significant impacts on animal life and health and, implicitly, on Inuit. The story of Inuit not feeling empowered and healthy⁶ reverberates with the story of the northern ecosystem: it is not healthy and it cannot be healthy unless Inuit are empowered to be at the forefront of studying their homeland, and to be decision makers in the solutions put forward.

If there is a pressing societal need for science- and evidence-based policy expertise in assessing and planning for the impacts of climate change over the next several decades, I must express my frustration in how we, as a society, have failed to purposefully provide space for Inuit within the research arena of knowledge production and exchange regarding Arctic climate change science. We are doing this at our own peril. This is all the more relevant when Arctic research has become a multi-million dollar industry (i.e., hiring faculty, creating laboratories, remote sensing stations, new engineering and technology apparatuses, academic conferences, travel, and countless other support systems), driving the prestige of universities and creating arbiters of “credible” knowledge and expertise, while the people embedded physically, emotionally, and economically in the Arctic are largely left out. Or, they are propped up in the global discourse as the victims of climate change.

To be fair, there are attempts to incorporate Indigenous epistemologies and methodologies in research, including proceeding with university-driven community research projects. By and large, though, the lead stays outside the Arctic, with Inuit merely consulted on research areas that mainly relate to community development or, at best, called on to contribute what has been called “traditional ecological knowledge” (TEK) where research gaps exist—following scientific translation and coding. I have argued elsewhere the problematic of TEK.⁷ Here, suffice it to say that we need to go beyond the paradigm of Inuit consultation in the spirit of diversity and equity, to one of Inuit self-determination in Arctic climate change research and policy. Continued land observations by Inuit are key data in this enterprise. But so are Inuit-led wildlife management and the prospect of Inuit being able to produce annual documentaries, for example, or youth-driven reporting with our embedded stories from hunters and Elders. Participating in climate change and other environmental assessment processes by Inuit means increased *applied* research capacity, sustainable northern economic development as per IQ approaches, and the opportunity that our community members would feel re-empowered to reclaim their role as the original stewards and guardians of *sila*, bestowed to us by *Anirnirq* (Great Spirit) and passed on through our *Innait* (Elders) and *atarniit* (ancestors).

Arctic warming is certainly a hot topic. For Inuit, though, it is burning: it is about our homelands, and yet we are left out in the national and global climate change conversation. Gathering evidence to inform policy-making in support of slowing down climate change, relates to a northern research and policy capacity-building paradigm that many of us in southern Canada are used to. My argument in this contribution is that the burning nature of the issue compels an alternative paradigm—one that is applied and solution-focused. The capacity is there, but it is a distinct, Inuit-specific capacity; the evidence is there, but it has been gathered and documented in a way that has not traditionally sat well with the exclusive understanding of science that drives evidence-based policy-making. If we, as a society, are to understand and design pragmatic solutions to climate change, Inuit need to be at the forefront of the research and decision-making process. As an Inuk, I see how our homelands are most affected, and so are we as a people. Our capacity and evidence needs not to be legitimized, but rather seen as a unique asset in approaching climate change in an integrated, applied, holistic manner—one that would mark a different way of investing research resources and of thinking through the complexity of the Arctic ecosystem: land, water, animals, *and* people. *Inuit, namiipita?*

Notes

1. This location allows me to oscillate between making the case, from both Inuit and Western perspectives, for the urgency of having Inuit as central players in Arctic climate change research and policy-making. It is a privileged location that “legitimizes” my voice as an Inuk in this conversation, a position that many of my fellow Inuit, albeit more informed than I could ever be, do not have.
2. Mary Simon, “A new Shared Arctic Leadership Model. Independent report by the Minister’s Special Representative on Arctic Leadership,” March 2017, <https://www.rcaanc-cirnac.gc.ca/eng/1492708558500/1537886544718?wbdisable=true>. These questions underscored Simon’s engagement, analysis, and advice on two important aspects: 1) new conservation goals for the Arctic in the context of sustainable development; and 2) the social

and economic priorities of Arctic leaders and Indigenous peoples in remote Arctic communities.

3. IQ “encompasses all aspects of traditional Inuit culture, including values, world-view, language, social organization, knowledge, life skills, perceptions, and expectations”: Anonymous (1998), quoted in George Wenzel, “From TEK to IQ: Inuit Qaujimagatuqangit and Inuit cultural ecology,” *Arctic Anthropology* 41, no. 2 (2004): 240, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40316631>. It would translate as “Inuit way of doing things: the past, present, and future knowledge, experience and values of Inuit Society”: S. Awa, L. Tapardjuk, “The First Annual Report of the Inuit Qaujimagatuqanginnut (IQ) Task Force” (Government of Nunavut, 2002), 4. The applied and communal aspects of life in the North, inclusive of land, water, animals, and sky, inform IQ, which revolves around the traditional notion of “sila.” The Inuit concept of sila implies conservation attributes (i.e., living in harmony with nature). However, it is different from the Western understandings of “land,” “nature,” or “the environment”—it is a state of being in intellectual, biological, psychological, environmental, locational, and geographical senses: Rachel A. Qitsualik, “Inummarik: Self-sovereignty in Classic Inuit Thought,” in *Inuit qaujimatuganqut* (ed.), *Nilliajut: Inuit perspectives on security, patriotism and sovereignty* (Ottawa: Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami, 2013, 23), 29.
4. IPCC, “Climate Change 2013: The Physical Science Basis,” in T.F. Stocker, D. Qin, G.-K. Plattner, M. Tignor, S.K. Allen, J. Boschung, A. Nauels, Y. Xia, V. Bex, and P.M. Midgley (eds.), *Contribution of Working Group to the Fifth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change* (Cambridge University Press, 2013).
5. Simon, “A new Shared Arctic Leadership,” 2017.
6. Pitseolak Pfeifer, “From the Credibility Gap to Capacity Building: An Inuit Critique of Canadian Arctic Research,” *Northern Public Affairs*, 6, no. 1 (July 2018): 29–34.

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