

Climate Change Challenges Faced by the Inuit

BY VIOLET FORD

OUR ANCESTRY AND HERITAGE AS INUIT bind us together, transcending national borders in the circumpolar world, where we have carried out sustainable livelihoods for millennia, and maintained our traditions and culture throughout the countries we inhabit. More recently, the Inuit have also successfully established autonomous governance structures. Since the end of colonialism, land claims are now being settled for the Inuit of Canada, which has created a new relationship with the government and has provided certainty of legal

rights for the Inuit. In Greenland, the home rule government has also provided for more Inuit involvement in decision making. As part of our new political position, we are able to support and strengthen our connection to the territorial and resource base of our culture in a sustainable manner through direct participation in newly established management boards and through co-management programs.

However, major obstacles still exist for the Inuit. The challenges facing the Inuit and affecting their livelihoods include maintaining the quality and nutrition of traditional foods in the Arctic, and accessing adequate health care services. For exam-



Climate Change Forces Greenland Fishermen To Diversify—An Inuit fisherman looks for seals near his home town of Ilimanaq, Greenland. This fisherman has largely given up summer fishing forays for the more lucrative choice of hosting eco-tourists in his home, but he still remembers the last time the sea around his village froze over some 10 years ago, and says that in recent years the soil under the houses has defrosted, flowers bloom earlier in the year and the sea has more chunks of ice than before.

ple, chemical contaminants can build up in the food chain to levels that can be harmful to humans. In addition, climate change is impacting Inuit livelihoods, as witnessed by: the thinning of sea-ice; a rapid melting of permafrost; the increasing number of days without snow; and longer summers. Our plight is relatively unknown in the international arena, and we have no preferential access to funds to assist us in meeting the additional pressures that climate change is placing on our communities.

Responding to climate change and adaptive measures being taken

INUIT COMMUNITIES are currently discussing how to adapt to the impacts of climate change, including potential changes in diet due to food availability. In some regions such as Labrador, the Inuit have already made adjustments to the times of year during which they travel by land, and some have begun collecting winter wood and other supplies in the spring, instead of the fall, because the fall freeze-up is occurring later and is more dangerous. In addition, Inuit fishers are checking fishnets more frequently and carrying out harvesting activities earlier in the year. These shifts of time and place of harvesting represent their ability to adapt to changes taking place. Inuit communities are also discussing the idea of community freezers to alleviate concerns of food security, and at the community level, heritage sites are being recommended to provide protection against erosion. A return to more traditional skills could also help alleviate damages as well as recover skills, and could help with including traditional knowledge in research and actions relating to adaptation.

These types of adaptive measures require a merging of both the scientific and the traditional Inuit understanding of changes taking place. Much needed funds, which are required to address the challenges of climate change, are eluding the Inuit—funds that are needed to build and maintain capacity to ensure that the Inuit address these challenges effectively and continue to exist. The Inuit recognize that adapting to climate change requires working at all levels of government and society.

The role of the Inuit Circumpolar Council and action at the international level

ACTION IN ASSISTING COMMUNITIES TO ADAPT, as well as mitigating the effects of climate change and reducing the levels of emissions, is required now. For this reason, the Inuit Circumpolar Council (ICC), which represents approximately



Local Inuit children in the fishing community of Kimmirut, Baffin Island, Nunavut, Canada.

160,000 Inuit living in the Arctic regions of Alaska, Canada, Greenland and Chukotka, Russia, has been very active in aggressively pursuing a response to climate change and continues to advocate for a seat at the negotiating table at the international level, within such processes as the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). The ICC's principal goals are to: strengthen unity among the Inuit of the circumpolar region; promote Inuit rights and interests at the international level; ensure and further develop Inuit culture and society for both present and future generations; seek full and active participation in the political, economic and social development in their homelands; develop and encourage long-term policies, which safeguard the Arctic environment; and work for international recognition of the human rights of all indigenous peoples.

Through the aggressive efforts of the ICC, Inuit voices are now being heard at the international level on matters related to climate change, along with the voices of many others, such as the small island developing States. However, there needs to be a more coherent effort, on the part of all indigenous peoples, in voicing our concerns within the UNFCCC process as climate change is severely affecting us all, interfering with our livelihoods and our rights, as recognized under international law. We need to be involved in the decision-making process and in intergovernmental negotiations regarding the roadmap for adaptation measures. In conclusion, governments need to consult with us when making decisions, as these decisions will ultimately impact on our rights and livelihoods.

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