

Building Sustainability into a Changing Arctic

**The Honourable Eva Aariak,
Former Premier of Nunavut***

The year 2012 saw Arctic sea ice retreat to a new record low, and the melting of permafrost as far north as Ellesmere Island. The changes in our climate that we were told would take place over decades are, instead, happening over years. We in Nunavut are coping with extreme weather events, shifting wildlife patterns, and damage to our limited infrastructure.

Year after year, more Nunavut hunters are falling through the deteriorating ice as the changes erode centuries' worth of Inuit knowledge. The changes are so rapid and so profound that they are stretching the ability of our hunters, and the capacity of our way of life to adapt accordingly.

At the same time, activity in the Arctic is increasing. Cruise ship traffic in Nunavut has doubled in the past five years and oil exploration is proceeding in the waters of Kalaallit Nunaat (Greenland), Russia, and Alaska. With a longer ice-free season, the extraction of more of the Arctic's natural resources becomes possible.

This leaves Nunavummiut—the people of Nunavut—with difficult choices. On the one hand, there is the possibility of economic expansion for our communities currently struggling with unemployment and limited opportunities. On the other hand, increased traffic and industrial activity bring new risks for our fragile environment—the foundation of our culture, our diet and our well being. To the people who live in the Arctic, this is not an either-or debate. Rather, it is a question of finding the right approaches that will maximize the benefits and minimize the negative impacts.

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So what can be done to ensure that Arctic nations and communities are prepared to meet these challenges?

It starts with engagement at the international level. Earlier this year, Canada assumed the chairmanship of the Arctic Council—the international body made up of eight Arctic states along with representatives of the region’s indigenous peoples. The Arctic Council is playing a growing role on issues such as climate change, pollutants and shipping in the Arctic through comprehensive scientific research and analysis and co-ordinated proposals for action among Arctic nations.

This has led to new multilateral agreements, including the 2001 *Convention on Persistent Organic Pollutants*, and the first pan-Arctic treaty in 2011 to co-ordinate search and rescue efforts by air and sea among the nations of the Arctic Council. Earlier in 2013, Arctic Council ministers signed a new treaty on preparing for Arctic oil spills, and have recently launched work towards an agreement to reduce the pollution that is accelerating the impacts of climate change in the Arctic.

For these initiatives to be truly effective, words on paper must be bolstered by actions on the ground. The Canadian military currently has no search and rescue resources based north of 60 degrees to support our treaty commitments. Despite the fact that Canada’s Arctic coastline is twice as long as the Atlantic and Pacific coasts combined, there is not a single port in the Arctic to support an oil spill clean-up or a major maritime rescue. The historic lack of investment in Nunavut’s infrastructure, in fact, runs much deeper.

Our communities are spread out over two million square kilometres (roughly half the size of the European Union). There are no roads, railways, ports, fibre-optic cables or even power lines to connect our communities to each other or to the rest of Canada. The lack of infrastructure is at the root of Nunavut’s high cost of living and its acute housing shortage. It also poses a barrier to effective contingency planning for search and rescue, and for emergency response.

This is why the Government of Nunavut is calling for a new long-term partnership with Canada to put in place essential infrastructure through a staged and carefully planned strategy. Such an initiative would be aimed at lowering the cost of doing business in the Arctic, encouraging economic development and improving the quality of life for Nunavummiut. It would also strengthen the resilience of our communities in adapting to the changes in climate that are already reshaping the landscape. Moreover, it would enable Nunavummiut to participate directly in monitoring activity in the Arctic, enforcing Canadian laws and responding to emergencies.

As a people who have lived in the Arctic for centuries, we are in the best position to act as stewards of its environment and to make decisions about its future. For several decades, we have been working to overcome a history of colonization by bringing decision-making back home. This year will mark the 20th anniversary of the signing of the *Nunavut Land Claims Agreement*. This historic agreement established the institutions of public government that are needed for Inuit and government actors to manage lands and resources together. These agencies and boards are now at the forefront of ensuring that development in Nunavut unfolds in a manner that is sustainable both for our communities and the fragile Arctic environment on which we depend.

As a result of the land claim, Canada also established the territory of Nunavut with a population that is 85 percent Inuit. The creation of a publicly elected government for Nunavut gave its people control over areas like health, education and justice. Despite these important achievements, the Government of Nunavut still controls less than two percent of the lands in its own territory. Over 80 percent of the land in Nunavut continues to be administered by Canada’s federal government, and it is a minister in distant Ottawa who makes the final decisions about how to manage, develop and protect our natural resources. The next step in

reclaiming our self-reliance will involve devolving jurisdictional control over land and resources to the people of Nunavut. We need to ensure that we keep more of the benefits of development in Nunavut and give our people a stronger role in shaping our future.

During its chairmanship of the Arctic Council from 2013 to 2015, Canada has the opportunity to showcase its past achievements in improving Arctic governance and to create a stronger role for sub-national Arctic governments, like those of Nunavut and Greenland, in the work of the Arctic Council. As nations around the world—from Italy, China, Singapore and Korea—rush to join the Arctic Council as observers, those who actually live in the Arctic, including Nunavummiut, need to have their voices heard internationally.

Canada's chairmanship will also be a critical time to demonstrate leadership and conviction in making the difficult decisions needed to put the Arctic on a more sustainable path towards economic development and healthy, viable communities. This will require a determined effort to engage with our circumpolar neighbours, while also backing up our words with real commitments on the ground in the Arctic. With unprecedented changes happening around us, the future depends on getting it right.