

Inuit life in Canada's remote Arctic: Does it compare with indigenous peoples of Australia?

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Abstract

Indigenous peoples have a particular significance to many countries, and in particular to Australia and Canada. There are many contextual similarities between Australia and Canada and as well many differences. The land claims settlement that created Nunavut was heralded worldwide because it created an aboriginal run government within the federation of Canada. There are many challenges facing the new territory and its young government. The youth - the hope for the future, have low self-esteem, particularly among girls. Unemployment rates among the Inuit are high. According to most standard measures and indices the Inuit have poor levels of health. Tension exists between the Inuit who are both creating their own government and have obligations as a territorial government within the federation of Canada. Communication technologies and open markets have created a global village, of which we are all a part. Part of the dilemma centers upon combining traditional values, culture and beliefs and integrating them with the values, cultures and beliefs of the rest of the world. Another part of the dilemma is about an increasing "digital divide" that exists not only between countries, but also within countries. Solutions to these dilemmas will require creativity and perseverance. However, it is hoped that this discussion that some light will be shed on issues of mutual concern.

Introduction

Indigenous peoples have a particular significance to many countries, and in particular to Australia and Canada. Although there are many contextual similarities between Australia and Canada, there are also many differences. Some of the similarities have to do with large land size and a relatively small population. Other comparisons include relatively recent European colonization, and an inherited political system based on the British parliamentary system. While being in opposite hemispheres and differing dramatically in climate, indigenous peoples share many health concerns. Based on two years spent working in both Canada and Australia, this paper elucidates many of the factors that lead to the illnesses experienced by the Inuit people in Canada. It will be of interest to those working towards wellbeing for indigenous peoples in Australia, and elsewhere.

Canada is a vast nation, in fact it is the second largest country based on size though it has a relatively small population. The country's population is approximately 30 million. The country is made up of 10 provinces and three territories. The territories occupy the northern most part of the country. April 1999 saw the creation of Canada's third territory, Nunavut. Since that time, we have been able to look closely at the health status of the Inuit in Nunavut and how historical factors and the challenges of current day and the future impact on the Inuit.

At the provincial level, Canada has a national health care system with fiscal and administrative responsibility, providing that certain principles are followed. There are five principles to the health care system: public administration, comprehensiveness, universality, portability and accessibility. The principles ensure that the system is non-profit and is managed by a public authority, that all necessary medical interventions are covered, that all residents are insured, that residents are insured anywhere in the country and that health care services are available. In Canada, there is only a limited role for private health insurance; to cover extended health benefits such as a private room in the hospital, additional physiotherapy, and medications for people not on social assistance.

Background

Nunavut came into existence on April 1, 1999. It was carved out of the eastern part of the Northwest Territories, and is situated to the north of the provinces of Manitoba, Ontario, Quebec and Newfoundland. Nunavut's birth as Canada's third territory came after more than 25 years of negotiations and one of the largest aboriginal land claims settlement anywhere. Nunavut is the largest geographic region within Canada, larger than either Quebec or Ontario. It has a population of approximately 27,000 of which 85% is Inuit. There are 27 communities spread across the territory but no roads connect the communities nor do any roads lead into the territory. Access is by sea for a few weeks during the summer or by air. Community size varies from approximately 100 to 2500, the average being 450. Iqaluit is the territory's capital and it has a population of approximately 5000.

The land is harsh for human habitation; the territory is located far north of the tree line, and has sparse vegetation for migratory caribou, birds, and small animals. Attempts at animal husbandry have been unsuccessful and the majority of the year the land is covered by ice and snow, thus incompatible with crop growth. Traditionally, the Inuit hunt and fish. They lived off polar bear, musk ox, caribou, walrus, seals and fish. These provide a high fat and protein diet enabling them to survive the harsh winters. Capturing these large mammals often involved a hunt of several days, when the Inuit would live in Igloos, or ice huts. Besides living in the Arctic, or "land of the midnight sun", the Inuit are known internationally for their stone carvings and artistic tapestries. Inuit carvings are given as official gifts to foreign dignitaries, to commemorate special events and sought after by collectors. However, many of the artists rely on an intermediary to reach national and overseas markets and galleries, and therefore do not receive significant compensation for their works. Other opportunities to attract outside investment include mining for tin, copper and nickel. While diamond mines have been discovered in the Northwest Territories, this is not true of Nunavut in the eastern Arctic.

The land claims settlement that created Nunavut was heralded worldwide because it created an aboriginal run government within the federation of Canada. Of all the provinces and territories in Canada, Nunavut is the only region where the majority of residents are aboriginal. The Inuit run the government has control over all issues that pertain to territorial matters. The official languages are Inuktitut and English. The government controls matters of education, health, and justice and has control over land such as resources and mineral deposits.

The governments of Nunavut and the Northwest Territories are unique in Canada in that they are consensus governments. This means that there are no political parties - candidates campaign in each riding, representing themselves and residents vote on a representative from their community. Those elected choose who will be the premier and who will form the cabinet. When issues are brought forward to the legislature, members discuss according to their community and their conscience, but there is no voting according to party lines. Before deciding upon an issue, there is extensive discussion with the objective of reaching consensus on the issue.

A major aspiration of the land claims settlement was to give this control back to the Inuit. They could combine traditional learning with western education. The youth could be assured of maintaining their language and knowing their history. Traditional skills such as hunting, fishing and carving could be passed on to new generations. Legal matters, justice and punishment could be combined with Inuit values while respecting the laws of Canada. Another objective of the land claims settlement was an attempt to move beyond the wrongs of the past and provide an opportunity to move forward based on the terms and conditions of the Inuit - an opportunity for expressing culture and tradition in the twenty first century. Finally, it is hoped success will be realized through the land claims agreement and the creation of Nunavut - giving an opportunity for the Inuit to be empowered and permit dealing with the rest of Canada as an equal rather than out of moral obligation.

Challenges

There are many challenges facing the new territory and its young government. Many, if not most of these challenges are in fact rooted in the past by the desires of the European settlers to have the Inuit conform to western ways. In particular, this included having nomadic people come to live together in groups and stationary communities and forcing them into house built of materials not locally found or produced and for which they had no understanding.

The youth - the hope for the future, have low self-esteem, particularly among girls. Western education is not seen as something young girls pursue and many girls said that their families did not want them to finish school. Many of the youth, both boys and girls do not finish high school since they see no benefit in obtaining a high school certificate. Girls as young as 12, 13 and 14 years old are often pregnant since it is an important for them to have babies culturally. The first baby is often given to another family member - called custom adoption. So a son or daughter may become the birth mother's brother or sister. The birth rate in Nunavut is the highest in the country and over 50% of the population is under 25 years old.

Unemployment rates among the Inuit are high. Many of the commercial establishments in Nunavut are owned and operated by non-Inuit. Most of the companies creating the new infrastructure (construction, health care, justice, education) rely on human resources from surrounding provinces. As stated above, there are limited ways to bring investment and provide employment in Nunavut. Tourism as a revenue generator in Nunavut is limited. The majority of the tourists are extreme sport enthusiasts including those who enjoy a dog sled trip or ski to the North Pole. Currently Nunavut is not a major stop for the

mainstream tourist. In the summer months cruise ships stop in a few communities in Nunavut but the visitors do not spend extended periods of time in the territory. Travel to Nunavut is very expensive as are accommodations and meals.

Another major and devastating issue is sexual and physical abuse. There are many reasons for the abuse; despair, low self-esteem, boredom, and illicit substance use, but there is no easy way to curb or end this. A wall of silence more often than not hides the abuse. There is abuse of alcohol - even though the territory is officially "semi-dry". There are no liquor stores in Nunavut and in several of the communities there is no alcohol permitted at all. In some communities like Iqaluit, liquor is available in restaurants and can only be purchased if a meal is ordered as well. The youth abuse other substances such as gasoline and glue.

According to most standard measures and indices the Inuit have poor levels of health. Their life expectancy is significantly lower than other Canadians and they suffer from chronic diseases at a greater rate than other Canadians. As well there are higher rates of maternal morbidity and mortality than the total Canadian population. There are also higher infant morbidity and mortality and stillbirths rates among the Inuit.

Another challenge has to do with the retention of qualified people in the territory. It is often found that there is high turn over of staff working in remote locations unless they are very well compensated. Not many organizations can afford to compensate staff to ensure that they stay and provide continuity of service. It has also been found that for local residents who become qualified often leave to larger centers to gain more experience and training. More often than not, they do not return to their home community.

Welfare and government handouts are also an issue, which bring along negative outcomes. The same goes for students who leave school. Giving money is not the answer. Welfare can be as devastating to the individual and community as is alcohol. Welfare creates a culture of dependence and entrenches racist stereotypes. Rather than giving handouts, there needs to be more of an emphasis focusing on sustainable economic outcomes. To support this, there needs to be investing of the land claims settlement funds and looking for opportunities to generate income for today's generation, and those to come. These opportunities need to be sound, viable and sustainable.

The despair is felt by so many. Today there is less of a need to rely on the traditional ways of "living off the land", but yet the Inuit are not fully participating in the "southern" economy since the market economy has not been fully embraced by the Inuit. One tragic outcome of this despair is the suicide rate in Nunavut which is 10 times the national average. Anyone you talk to in Nunavut will have had known someone who committed suicide and often it will have been a family member.

Some of the challenges are the result of things beyond one's control or influence, such as the remoteness of Nunavut, its climate, and the cost of importing goods and services from the rest of Canada. The cost of travel to and in the north is very expensive due to distance and demand.

Addressing these challenges requires political will and patience. Tension exists between the Inuit who are both creating their own government and have obligations as a territorial government within the federation of Canada. Competing priorities lead to frustration with having to conform to standards, procedures and the protocol of another government. Many of these mores appeared very unnecessary to enthusiastic Inuit, engaged in ensuring that traditional and cultural ways were adequately addressed in the new government. With time and familiarity these tensions may become less of an issue.

The Department of Health and Social Services

It was recognized that the Inuit and Nunavut faced significant challenges in terms of the health status of the population and the need for social services, thus the government set up the Department of Health and Social Services to face these challenges head on. Within each community there is a health and social services center. A nurse and a social services worker manage these. Each community also has a health representative who acts as a liaison between the community members and the formally trained health workers. The Community Health Representative is also responsible for health promotion.

There is one hospital in the territory and it is located in the east most region, Baffin. The hospital is a community level hospital and serves residents only in the Baffin region. For residents needing medical or social services beyond that which can be supplied at the health center, travel to a hospital in a neighboring province is necessary. Medical travel is the largest expenditure for the Department and the average cost for medical travel is approximately Cdn\$20 million annually.

To help support the government in having Nunavut become self sufficient with regards to health and social services, there are short training programs (two week to one year) offered through Nunavut Arctic College in the areas of social work, addictions, and health promotion. In 1999, the School of Nursing was established which is affiliated with Dalhousie University located in Nova Scotia. The school offers a four-year degree program. The first year the school was functional met with less than success. Of the sixteen students who entered the first year only three finished. One of the issues raised by community leaders was that the school may have been premature. In an environment where even secondary schooling has not been encouraged, especially for women, a college with all the rigor and expectations of large universities may not have been timely. Another approach could have included more upgrading for those who had already completed some health and social service training.

Discussion

Readers familiar with health and social service issues affecting the indigenous people of Australia will recognize the many similarities with the Inuit of Nunavut. As well, there are similarities with the histories of the two peoples, particularly in the last hundred years. They were the original inhabitants of a vast land that Europeans colonized and were forced to conform to European customs and ways. It is not until one works with the aboriginal peoples that their challenges and issues are fully appreciated.

After working and living in Nunavut we were left with many more questions than we were able to answer. It is our intention that by sharing our experiences and observations that it will generate dialogue and discussion in the hope of finding some answers to the following questions:

- Should change be brought about?
- How does one stimulate change?
- How does one measure that change?
- How can the workforce be continually motivated?
- What needs to be done, and in what order?

There are so many challenges and issues facing these geographically isolated peoples. The Nunavut government, with a budget of about Cdn\$600 million annually, allocates much of the resources according to measured or perceived needs. In addition, some non-governmental (Inuit/aboriginal) organizations and other federal sources have budgets in the millions. All of these groups, from different and sometimes opposite perspectives, are faced with the same questions of prioritization. Unfortunately, many people are often left feeling that they are not having an impact.

Conclusion

Communication technologies and open markets have created a global village, of which we are all a part. Remote areas are increasingly interconnected through telecommunication, increased trade, travel and the opening of borders. Some examples of this are the various free trade zones, which have been created throughout the world. Those who try to remain isolationists or who wish to land lock their territory will not succeed as it becomes more apparent how much we are interdependent on each other. When we cut down trees or add more industry to a city the impacts ripple across many miles away in terms of the economy, environment, and culture. Part of the dilemma centers upon combining traditional values, culture and beliefs and integrating them with the values, cultures and beliefs of the rest of the world, be it western, eastern, Asian or whatever culture. Some argue, 'Why should the Inuit be concerned with integration? Why can't they just have their own culture and not bother about functioning in other cultures.' This approach is naïve and fosters racism and discrimination. Others would argue, 'Why shouldn't the Inuit be full participating members and have a right to be involved as much as any other culture.' In fact we are all learning how to adapt, accommodate and associate with the varying cultures. Another part of the dilemma is about the increasing "digital divide" that exists not only between countries, but also within countries. The Inuit of Canada, as many indigenous people worldwide, are experiencing a loss of heritage and self-esteem, dependency, self harm, isolation and marginalization. Thus they do not participate as actively in trade, telecommunication, and other "digital" activities. Solutions to these dilemmas will require creativity and perseverance. It is hoped that this editorial discussion will shed some light on issues of mutual concern. Perhaps we will start to see people working together for positive change who are rooted not in geographical proximity, but in one of shared ideology.