

# Hungry Days in Nunavut: The Façade of Inuit Self-Determination

by Kunuk Inutiq

**YEARS AGO**, I was in my hometown to attend a funeral for a loved one. In many of our communities, after burials, visitors come to see the family and mourn with them. There is storytelling, laughter and crying. It is an ultimate act of love and compassion that I appreciate so much about Inuit. In one's deep sorrow, you are reminded about closeness and community.

In anticipation of visitors after the church service, I had bought supplies for a spread of cheese and cold meats. I cut them up, prepared a big platter, and went to get another one ready. When I returned, in what felt like just a blink of an eye, the food was all gone. I looked at the Elders sitting in the living room who had yet to be served, and my immediate reaction was to be upset and think, "How selfish." But as fast as that thought came, I remembered my own days of hunger.

After moving to the town of Clyde River from an outpost camp where I spent much of my childhood, I remember the days we would miss meals and live on tea and bannock for long stretches. As a result, I could not drink tea for years. To this day, I can't have tea or too much bread on an empty stomach; it makes me feel queasy. My body remembers too well the days of deprivation. Back in our hungry days, I remember once being served a giant plate of spaghetti and engulfing it in minutes. Then, after, looking around and realizing in embarrassment the "slow" and polite pace of others. But I remember now that the spaghetti didn't even make me full. Continued hunger can do that: Deplete your body's ability to feel satisfied. And you can eat until you vomit.

It is a vivid memory for me — a moment in a childhood where I felt shame, separated from others.

Sadly, this is the reality for **three-quarters of children** (or 46% of homes) where there is food insecurity in Nunavut. While an astounding figure, this is not a reflection of parents or caretakers "not doing enough." It is a product of colonialism. Poverty is not an accident; it is engineered.

**Our world is structured to ensure power and wealth grow for the colonial state and those that uphold it, at the expense of Indigenous and racialized peoples' lives. These structures are designed to uphold poverty, yet we feel responsible for our plight, carrying the shame and ineptitude for not doing enough.**

## A FAÇADE OF INUIT SELF-DETERMINATION

Inuit negotiators worked hard for over 20 years to realize a governance structure they thought would protect Inuit culture and improve Inuit lives. They achieved what they could within the limitations of the Canadian system that offers few material rights to Indigenous people: A land claim and a new territorial government with a consensus-based Westminster-style government.

Nunavut means “our land” or “our homeland” — a name given to a new jurisdiction in Canada as a strong statement of reclamation of land and ourselves. We Inuit said, “This is our homeland!”

On the surface, Inuit in Nunavut look like they have achieved self-determination through a public government model that serves the majority of Inuit, with land claim rights that are to be implemented.

**However, the assumption that the public government is a form of self-determination is a farce: Inuit interests have not been served by the government because Inuit lives have not improved. What we have is a façade of self-determination where senior bureaucracy is made up of 85% non-Inuit upholding a system that benefits settlers.**

In many areas, Inuit quality of life has declined or has stayed the same, including the basic needs for food security and housing. Nunavut Inuit face a severe housing crisis. Income remains low (non-Inuit make almost five times more on average, according to the 2016 census), and Nunavut has a very young population (or high growth population). Raising standards of living has to factor in looking after children and youth by making sure they are receiving their basic needs and being raised with the Inuit child rearing practices of Inunnguiniq. That is, striving to raise children to be healthy and productive parts of society — **not pushing students out of school** by disrespecting Inuit language and way of life, as is currently the case.

Hunting society amid an extraction economy is a recipe for conflict, and the mining economy more often wins as the system favours it. Canada’s food policies and programs are agricultural systems-based, which is also incongruent to the Inuit hunting way of life. Moreover, with the hangover and related damage of anti-fur and anti-sealing campaigns of the 1970s and 1980s — led by environmental groups such as Greenpeace — the idea that hunting is barbaric still pervades.

This state of affairs raises the question: Who is actually benefiting from Nunavut?

## WHO BENEFITS IN NUNAVUT?

I think we have to confront the reality that Nunavut is for Southern Canada — for these transient settlers I refer to as “incomers.” In other words, Nunavut is still very much a colony; it is a place for others to generate wealth from our lands and resources and leave the scraps and waste for the Inuit. Consider our contemporary reality:

In addition to the wage gap mentioned (incomers making five times that of Inuit), economic leakage is a major problem in Nunavut, where wages and purchase of supplies go directly south. Most Government of Nunavut (GN) procurement contract expenditures go **outside the territory**. In the ten fiscal years between 2010–2020, 61% of procurement expenditures went outside Nunavut; in 2019-2020, 76% went to firms outside of Nunavut. Between 2015-2020, GN sent over \$1.4B south.

A **study** commissioned by Nunavut Housing Corporation on housing construction costs found that 60% of costs associated with building housing units flow directly to the south in both labour and materials. If modular or semi-modular homes are considered, then the economic leakage is even more for modular models: 83% of spending flowing south.

Another company that reaps huge profits is the Northwest Company. Is there a clearer indication of colonial supply chains than the monopoly known as the Northern? While it provides almost all communities with retail and grocery outlets, this singular operation also exploits staff and overcharges consumers. Southerners complain of recent grocery inflation; Inuit have never known non-inflationary shopping. In the last two years, the Northwest Company reported a gross profit of over **\$700 million each year**. Strikingly, the Northern is one monopoly among many in the territory.

And then there is mining. While a relatively recent phenomenon in Nunavut, companies like Baffinland and Agnico Eagle Mines are reporting billions in profit. Agnico made \$2.067 billion in 2021. By comparison, the Government of Nunavut's net spending for the 2020–21 fiscal year was \$2.584B. Obviously, Inuit benefit — there is employment in the mines and revenue sharing agreements — but it has to be acknowledged that the premise of these companies is to send profit from Nunavut.

With social and economic desperation and limited economic opportunities, the potential for tension within Inuit society is always present. We end up fighting over whether a mining activity should proceed or if we should stay economically deprived and try to protect a hunting way of life. The system is built to produce internal strife.

### **MEASURING LAND CLAIM AGREEMENT SUCCESS**

When the Nunavut Agreement was signed, the Canadian narrative was that it represented the largest land ownership by an Indigenous group in the world. We bought that line, and many of us probably repeated it. Still today, we hear Inuit say “Nunavutaaaratta” or “when we acquired Nunavut,” as if it was not our land to begin with. The public government with an Inuit majority population was celebrated as one of Canada's greatest successes in their relationship with Indigenous People. Many academic books and articles have been written — without Inuit input — repeating the myth. Today, the Canadian Government's Crown Indigenous and Northern Affairs of Canada (CIRNAC) website describes the Government of Nunavut as a form of self-government.

Like other land claim agreements, about 11% of our claim area (or the territory of Nunavut) is Inuit-owned, 8% of the subsurface is Inuit-owned, and the rest is above ground. Put another way, 89% of “our land” is actually Crown land with small amounts of municipal land. Moreover, our comprehensive land claim agreement, Article 2.12.1, states that federal, territorial, and local laws shall apply to Inuit-owned lands. This includes the free entry system, which means miners have the right to enter virtually all land and register a claim for minerals.

**Basically, under the Nunavut Agreement, our relationship with the land is defined by Canadian law, which itself emerged from a philosophy that views our lands as terra nullius (“empty land”). But it also means our economic system relies on exploiting the land and environmental destruction. It is no wonder deprivation and poverty are a mainstay in the current system: Our well-being is a reflection of the prospects we are given.**

There are features of the land claim meant to serve as a check on these exploitative impulses and reinforce Inuit values instead. But they have either not been fully implemented or not implemented at all.

For instance, the Nunavut Land Use Plan, that is supposed to identify how or when lands are to be used, does not exist and has been in development inertia for years. Land claim mandated Inuit employment within governments is supposed to be at 85% but has never increased more than 55%, including managerial positions (the supposed mechanism to integrate Inuit thought into government). Inuit participation in social and cultural policy has never been integrated into decision-making processes. In procurement processes, true Inuit businesses, not shell

companies, are supposed to be treated fairly; but as I already mentioned, contracts go to non-Inuit “established” companies.

The test to the success of a public government model is not only the state of social conditions but also what they have done to protect Inuit culture, including language and education. On those fronts, the Inuit have only seen tokenistic gestures. We have legislation on Inuit language and bilingual education, but they have not resulted in meaningful implementation or any real effort to protect our language. In fact, in a recent response to a lawsuit by Inuit on rights to education in Inuktitut, the Government of Nunavut has stated Inuit do not hold a right to be educated in Inuktitut. Our language continues to decline, with few systemic attempts to protect it. When English systems and way of life are normalized, we can see clearly the façade of Inuit self-determination.

The public government model that holds most of the mandate for legislation, programs, and services, and an Inuit organizations’ system that manages pockets of lands and benefits and serves as a lobby organization for “Inuit rights” is actually a perfect scenario for political inertia. The issue of Inuktitut education and Inuit employment is a perfect example: You have inaction by the government on Inuit will, and all the Inuit organizations can do is take it to court to try to create action. Colonialism is a cunning beast. We have bought into a system that still oppresses us.

### **FAMILY AND FOOD SOVEREIGNTY**

All is not lost, though. Inuit still hold the right to self-government, and Nunavut Tunngavik is now pursuing this option. Working in an UNDRIP context for social equity, we can rethink how to govern ourselves on our terms. But we have to make sure that it is not premised on exploitation. We have pockets of amazing language and cultural programs created by individuals and communities, in spite of our territorial government’s resistance to systematically delivering language programs.

If we are to truly self-determine, our relationship with our land must be defined by us. This is how we imagine an economic base that is more about relationships of reciprocity with our natural environment, one that will naturally strengthen kinship ties within our communities. This process must ensure that our basic needs — such as housing, food, water, security — are part of the planning for self-government. We also cannot leave out the need to recover and heal from the erasure and genocide of colonialism, as trauma and hurt are entrenched in our lives and manifest in many ways.

When our family lived in an outpost camp, I don’t ever remember being hungry. The hungry days came after the move into town when family members participated in a “wage economy.” I do remember wanting sugary treats that were not as accessible to us, but not being hungry. Our lives revolved around seasons, harvesting, and the weather. My greatest memories are family hunting and harvesting events and stories; kinship and family ties seemed impenetrable.

**When I think about economy and wellness, the foundation should be family and food sovereignty. This is not some utopian Indigenous fantasy – it already exists in real life.**

We see it in hunting economies re-emerging in my hometown of Clyde River, where the [Ittaq Research and Heritage Centre](#) employs four full-time hunters. Such examples demonstrate that the Inuit can determine their own relationship to their land and economies!

**CITATION:** Inutiq, Kunuk. “Hungry Days in Nunavut: The Façade of Inuit Self-Determination”. *Yellowhead Institute*. 17 May 2022. <https://yellowheadinstitute.org/2022/05/17/hungry-days-in-n...lf-determination/>