

Pijitsirniq and Ikajuqtigiinni as an Alternative Approach to Economic Development in Inuit Nunangat

by Patricia Johnson-Castle

THIS YEAR at the Aqsarniit Trade Show and Conference, Natan Obed — the President of Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami (ITK) — gave a speech highlighting the importance of building generational wealth in Inuit Nunangat. Obed said, “We should think about the transmission of wealth, the intergenerational wealth aspect of our [Inuit] society. We need to do more to ensure we are building wealth within our communities and families to ensure we are not starting from scratch every generation.”

Obed’s argument seems to be resurrecting a talking point from the 2018 Inuit Nunangat Housing Strategy (INHS) co-published by the Federal Government and ITK. In Southern Canada, home ownership is the primary strategy for families to build generational wealth. However, the extensive barriers to construction in the North make this possibility difficult even for Inuit with well-paid jobs; which is one example of how difficult it is for an individual to get “ahead.” The INHS argues for the need to create “affordable home ownership” — not because it’s a particularly appropriate tool to solve the overall housing crisis, but to “support and promote home ownership as a means of wealth generation and career creation that would further lessen the financial burden on governments” (12).

What if we thought the purpose of the government was to provide services to everyone? Would that change how we perceive “financial burdens” on governments?

Competition vs. Pijitsirniq and Ikajuqtigiinni

This Brief explains how the unique constraints in Inuit Nunangat (both real and constructed) make individualism and competition particularly bad fits for solving problems faced by Inuit society. Competition as a primary solution to social issues does not work in the North and is against

our long-standing values as Inuit. Rather than individual wealth creation, and because of the issues of cost and scale of “economic growth,” we must necessitate collective solutions coordinated by our governments and land claim organizations.

As individuals, Inuit have always found ways to contribute to our communities. Community members helped troubleshoot so that people with disabilities could actively contribute to our society, as Martina Pihujui explains in Uqalurait. Many Inuit suffer greatly from mental health traumas caused by colonialism. Rather than spending money from the sale of our land to heal our people our leaders are asking individuals to “solve” problems by joining the capitalist workforce.

Framing intergenerational wealth as a solution implies that Inuit are responsible for solving public issues by getting 9 to 5 jobs and becoming “rational economic actors.” Inuit traditional economies were not capitalist ones. The contemporary economy among Inuit isn’t capitalist in many instances either: when we look at our food harvesting practices, we don’t come back from a hunt and sell to the highest bidder. We still have responsibilities to share with elders and our families. Why are our leaders so committed to using capitalist strategies to solve our problems? Capitalism — an essential component of Canadian colonialism — is a cause of some of the crises we face.

Could we imagine an alternative? What if our land claim organizations and governments were mobilized to create collective intergenerational wealth through co-operative economic models rather than capitalist ones?

Within Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit (Inuit traditional knowledge), there is a heavy emphasis on collectivity. In particular, I want to highlight two pillars of Qaujimajatuqangit: pijitsirniq (serving and providing for family and/or community) and ikajuqtigiinni (working together for a common cause) as principles that should be emphasized in relation to wealth accumulation. The underlying assumption of the INHS is that the capitalist economic mechanism of homeownership as wealth creation is good in and of itself. The values of our ancestors, such as pijitsirniq and ikajuqtigiinni, show us there are more important priorities than wealth accumulation.

A “Camp” Model of Public Policy

Historically, food was the main indicator of a family’s wealth: families with large caches of meat for the winter were considered wealthier than those without. Elder Norman Attangalaaq in Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit teaches that, “For Inuit, sharing of food is [...] law. The importance of sharing food with others — celebrating with food and making sure that Elders and those in need were provided for — was continually reinforced by our parents.”

Attangalaaq illustrates this law by sharing a story about a family who arrived at camp in desperate need of food. The camp did not have a surplus but “the camp leaders agreed that they must provide food and share what they had, even at the expense of their own existence.”

This story demonstrates the lengths our ancestors taught us to go in pursuit of pijitsirniq — at times, serving and providing for our communities comes at our own expense. The teaching directly opposes the logic of market capitalism, which preaches “every person for themselves.” As Inuit, rather than emphasize the need for individuals to work to create intergenerational wealth for their families, what if we emphasize the need to serve and provide for both our families and whole communities?

The role of ITK is to advance the interests of Inuit through the meeting of the leaders of our land claim organizations to present a united front to the federal government. The negotiation of our modern treaties (or land claims) created state and corporate-style institutions to devolve power, allowing for greater Inuit self-determination. Negotiators of these processes were motivated by love and hope, as articulated by John Amagoalik: “We must teach our children their mother tongue and our philosophies which go back beyond the memory of man. We must keep the

embers burning so we may gather around (our ancestral fires) again.” I personally take Amagoalik’s teaching as a reminder of the need to root our solutions in Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit.

No agreement will ever be perfect, even when the motivations of the negotiators sent by our communities were (are) righteous and honourable. When any Indigenous community negotiates with Canada, the negotiators sent by the federal government assume that “functioning” institutions should look like other Canadian organizations. For Inuit, this is in large part why our agreements within each region have their own nuances, but all are either shaped into corporations or governments modelled after the system of government used by Canada. The agreements did devolve power to varying degrees so that we could make our own decisions, but our leaders haven’t used that power enough to benefit Inuit. Joan Scottie notes that even though she supported the Nunavut agreement “even after our land claim agreement was signed, not much has changed: most benefits still go to non-Inuit.”

We need to use the power established in the Inuit land claims agreements to create imaginative and truly Inuit forms of public policy intervention. We need to stop copying solutions that work in places with completely different circumstances, like densely populated urban areas interconnected by roads, trains, and planes.

What could the North look like if we stopped trying to use capitalist “solutions” to public policy?

The Fixed Constraints on Competition

Our governance through these land claim institutions has also led to the adoption of capitalist solutions to the policy crises in Inuit Nunangat. This is not exclusive to Inuit Nunangat, but it is heightened for us. In market economies, the hope is that when there is competition between service providers, the prices of goods and services will drop. Of course, not every sector benefits from competition; healthcare and education, for instance, are largely exempt from this philosophy under the principle of the “public good.” In the Inuit Nunangat context, the principle should be extended more broadly.

There are too many fixed constraints in the North competition to effectively promote growth. Food has to be flown in; building materials have to come on the sealift. These are non-negotiable truths because of the scope of the geographies of Inuit Nunangat. The coordination of government resources, however, could make a significant difference because governments can coordinate across these constraints. For example, the reason drug costs in Canada are so much lower than in the U.S. is because the Canadian government can negotiate bulk buying of medication with drug companies based on our entire population (in contrast to the U.S., where healthcare is not considered a public good and is, instead, marketized).

Meanwhile, anyone who travels in Inuit Nunangat on a regular basis has horror stories related to our airlines, particularly when traveling to smaller communities. When I posted to social media about my second day on weatherhold while trying to return to Nunatsiavut for winter break, friends in southern Canada were shocked at this very normal problem that Inuit face. We have many complaints about service delivery related to flying, with price being one of the most common. It's much less expensive to travel from Toronto to Europe than from Toronto to Nunavut. Competition is an ineffective mechanism for regulating plane tickets in Inuit Nunangat because there is not enough demand to sustain multiple airlines.

In February 2025, Exchange Income Corporation (EIC) purchased Canadian North, the airline that primarily services Nunavut and the Northwest Territories. This is the second major consolidation of Northern airlines in six years. In 2017-2018, First Air and Canadian North shared some flights for the convenience of their passengers and the two companies. In 2019, the two companies merged their business interests for those routes rather than continue their collaboration. The Competition Bureau accepted the merger against the warning of a report submitted to Transport Canada that argued the merger would cause airfares to become even more expensive and likely substantially decrease competition on many routes. At the time, Nunatsiaq News reported that Duane Smith – the chair of the Inuvialuit Regional Corp, who owned Canadian North at the time – said the merger would aid in “empowering Inuit to become meaningful participants in both the Northern and national economies.”

Six years later, EIC – a company based out of Winnipeg – purchased the conglomerated Canadian North/First Air. This is evidence of how services for smaller populations in the North are economically pushed towards monopolization rather than competition. In the instance of our airlines, the result means that now Southern Canadians rather than Inuit will be profiting from the structural remoteness of Inuit Nunangat.

For us, air travel is not optional; it is equivalent to a highway. Is the privatization of the Trans-Canada highway imaginable for Southern Canadians? I don't think so.

Why, then, are we so ready to accept companies profiting off essential infrastructure in the North?

Housing and Hunting in Inuit Nunangat

Let's return to housing. Currently, there is a mix of public and private housing ownership in the North. One of the reasons public housing is a “financial burden on governments” is that, for the most part, people living in public housing struggle to pay their rent because they are on income support. People on income support across the North often have to make difficult decisions about what they will spend their limited money on: food for their families or rent.

Instead, we can consider other models for housing in the North. What if everyone lived in public housing? If no one in Inuit Nunangat owned their own home and everyone lived in government housing, wealthier tenants could help subsidize those with less income. One scenario: rent could be set at 30 percent of one's monthly income (the idealized portion for rent in many cost of living estimates). In Nunavut, social assistance for a couple with two children is a little over \$1800 a month. In this scenario, they would pay \$540 in rent; while someone making \$10,000 a month would pay \$3,000. This is similar to the concept of a tax bracket. We can ask for more money from wealthier people because it does not have the same proportionate impact on their wallets. I argue this is a model of pricing based on ikajuqtigiinniq (working together for a common cause). Since everyone deserves a safe place to live, wealthier people contributing more in proportion to their income is a form of working together for a common cause. The present housing market is literally pushing Inuit out of our

own territories because it ties work or capitalist understandings of “productivity” to housing. Since many people live in staff housing tied to their employment, if someone retires, they lose their housing. People whose whole lives have been created in staff housing, whose staff house was their home, may need to leave Inuit Nunangat after they retire if the current housing model pushes them out. If all housing were public, then people’s housing would no longer be tied to their jobs, which would stop them from having to leave Inuit Nunangat when they retire.

Hunting is a related example of the incongruity of labour market participation and Inuit values. Inuit who work 9 to 5 jobs can afford to buy the gear needed to go hunting (costly gas, snowmobiles, boats, bullets, and so on) but don’t have time to hunt. Meanwhile, those who are not in the labour market have the time to go hunting but can’t afford to. This imbalance demonstrates the difficulty for contemporary Inuit practicing pijitsirniq and ikajuqtigiinniq.

The current economic approach has prevented Inuit from having equal access to self-determination as individuals. For too long, our leaders have focused on trying to discipline Inuit into being capitalists. Instead, they could have leveraged the power our families and ancestors negotiated in our land claims to build institutions that work for us. What kind of institutions and policies can we imagine when we unshackle ourselves from the market economy; what kind of alternatives already exist that we could adopt?

Considering the Co-operative Economy

Co-operative grocery stores are commonplace in Nunavut and Nunavik and are a great example of using the market-based system for the principle of the common good. Perhaps, somewhat surprisingly, the U.S. economy offers us some interesting examples. There are many different ways to structure businesses that are more collective and collaborative than the traditional, hierarchical business model. In the United States, there are big companies that are owned by their employees. Publix Super Markets in Florida is owned in large part by its more than 250,000 employees. HDR, Inc. is an architecture and engineering company in Nebraska with 13,000 employees. The 12,000 employees of Davey Tree Expert Co. own the Ohio based company. These exist in Republican states. Employee ownership structures,

according to the Rutgers School of Management and Labor Relations, can include:

- Members have governance rights, giving them control over operational or strategic decisions.
- Employees own a substantial percentage of stock shares and benefit financially.
- The business mission focuses on worker benefits.

Workers usually need to stay employed with the company for a minimum period of time before they can begin to benefit from employee ownership, which can help with retention. The model helps workers stay motivated to positively contribute to the company because there is a direct connection between employee benefits and revenue. It can also help with succession planning within companies because employees are more likely to be engaged with and understand the business. Rather than bringing in outside talent, it makes even more business sense to provide training and opportunities for existing employees. There are serious roadblocks many Inuit face in attending postsecondary education. For example, in many high schools, academic levels of core subjects, like math are unavailable or only available by distance learning. Another example is that there is no university in Inuit Nunangat. In our context, on-the-job training is hugely important to skill acquisition. These ownership models can be applied to businesses of any size and directly correspond to the Inuit values of pijitsirniq and ikajuqtigiinniq.

American worker-owned businesses exist across sectors of the U.S. economy, from construction and engineering to environmental services and manufacturing to retail. We know many Inuit have already benefitted from co-operative grocery stores, so why can’t we establish housing co-operatives on a wide scale?

In this Brief, I’ve worked to show how the scale of Inuit lifeways makes capitalism an inappropriate way to structure life in the North. Capitalism is another way to discipline Inuit culture towards assimilation by encouraging individuals to build wealth by undercutting and competing with others.

This ideology flies in the face of Inuit values, and it is time to ask critical questions of ourselves and our leaders about the shape of our economic futures.

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