

**OPEN ACCESS**

## Climate change – a challenge for the arctic indigenous peoples – the Inuit response

To cite this article: Aqqaluk Lynge 2009 *IOP Conf. Ser.: Earth Environ. Sci.* **8** 012011

View the [article online](#) for updates and enhancements.

### You may also like

- [Resilience-based steps for adaptive co-management of Arctic small-scale fisheries](#)  
Eranga K Galappaththi, Marianne Falardeau, Les N Harris et al.
- [Ensuring continuity and impact in Arctic monitoring: a solution-orientated model for community-based environmental research](#)  
Louise Mercer, Dustin Whalen, Deva-Lynn Pokiak et al.
- [A systems network approach for climate change vulnerability assessment](#)  
Nathan S Debortoli, Jesse S Sayles, Dylan G Clark et al.



**ECS**  
The  
Electrochemical  
Society  
Advancing solid state &  
electrochemical science & technology

**DISCOVER**  
how sustainability  
intersects with  
electrochemistry & solid  
state science research

## **Climate change – a challenge for the arctic indigenous peoples – the inuit response\***

**Aqqaluk Lynge**

President - ICC-Greenland, Vice Chair - Inuit Circumpolar Council (ICC), P.O. Box  
204, 3900 Nuuk. Greenland

E-mail: aqqaluk@inuit.org

**\*Opinion article (not peer-reviewed)**

I would like to thank the University of Aarhus and the organizers of this very important conference for their kind invitation to speak here today. This conference is important for many reasons, not the least because it is helping us to prepare for one of the most important global meetings that Denmark has hosted. The Inuit Circumpolar Council, which represents Inuit from Russia to Greenland, is very keen on playing an active role in the events leading up to the post Kyoto meeting. And we are also very happy to be playing a role here as well.

We are gathered here for a conference about moving forward, about forging new partnerships among the public sector, the private sector, and civil society. Many of these partnerships will be centered on new technologies that we hope might help address the enormous problem of climate change.

But I am here today as a representative of the Inuit, the indigenous people of the Arctic, and our perspective on climate change is different. Our worldview is not focused on technology. Our worldview does, however, have a great deal in common with Gro Harlem Brundtland's groundbreaking work on sustainable development, which pointed us to a holistic view of development, an understanding of development as a process that involves much more than simply finding innovative, technological solutions to developmental problems like climate change.

When I think of "sustainable development," I think of traditions. I think of moving forward in ways that cherish the land, the sea and the Arctic flora and fauna. I think of how my ancestors lived for countless generations and how they gradually developed tools and technologies that were adapted to our changing circumstances. For me, adaptation is doing the same things my ancestors have done for centuries, because adaptability is at the core of what it means to be Inuit. My Inuit ancestors passed on the knowledge that adaptation means moving to follow where the wildlife is going, sharing a successful hunt with other families who might not have found the food they needed, adjusting our diet from year to year based on which animals or fish are plentiful at the time, and learning how to make warm clothing out of animal skins to keep our hunters safe and healthy out in the cold. I think of these old ways because they were developed precisely out of our need to continuously adapt. And these ways have been successful in helping my people to survive for hundreds of years.

Inuit are adapting to climate change. But rather than doing something radically new, we are mostly adapting in ways that are similar to the ways that Inuit have always adapted. The Inuit perspective on climate change is that we must find adaptation strategies that look both to the past and to the future.

When we look to the past, it is clear to us that the physical, mental, social, cultural and economic aspects of our well-being are all intimately connected to the Arctic ecosystem. Our health and well-being are utterly dependent on what we are able to harvest from the land and the sea around us.

Now, I am not trying to tell you that each and every Inuit person is out hunting or fishing every day. In Greenland, our full-time hunters share and sell what they have harvested, and many who participate in the wage economy go hunting several times a year. But whether they are out on the land themselves or not, the majority of Inuit place great importance on eating traditional foods. Traditional foods are part of our identity. They are more affordable than store-bought food. And they are healthier, in spite of the persistent organic pollutants, or POPs, that originate thousands of kilometres away and become embedded in our food chain.

Because our well-being is so dependent on our subsistence activities, anything that threatens our subsistence activities threatens our health. We have faced such threats before.

In the 1980s, the threat to Inuit health came from a political decision made in Europe to ban seal imports. The resulting collapse in the global seal market had an enormous impact on Inuit communities across the circumpolar Arctic. Our hunters were told not only that their work was worth very little, but also that it was morally wrong. Our artists, who made beautiful products from seal parts, found that their market too had collapsed. Inuit health was severely affected. Suicide rates increased, and a sense of worthlessness was more evident in many villages. Now the European Union is about to embark on another ban, this time on all seal products it seems. While they talk about an "Inuit exemption," the ban will still hurt us tremendously.

In the 1990s, we discovered that POPs (persistent organic pollutants) had invaded our pristine Arctic ecosystem from the south and attached themselves to the fatty tissue of the sea mammals that form the basis of the Inuit diet. These pollutants – such as DDT pesticides and PCBs (Polychlorinated biphenyls) – have found their way into our bodies and even into the breast milk of our nursing mothers at a concentration seven times that found in mothers in Aarhus or Toronto.

Now, in the past decade, Inuit health is being threatened by the effects of climate change. As most of us have heard by now, the Arctic is warming more quickly than any other part of the planet. Greenland's ice cap is melting. Our coasts are eroding, storms are becoming stronger and less predictable, the sea ice we travel on while hunting is becoming much more dangerous and difficult to read, and the species we rely upon for subsistence are changing their migration patterns.

The effects of climate change are a threat to Inuit health mainly because they make it more difficult and dangerous for us to harvest our food. However, climate change is also expected to bring new bacteria and other microorganisms to our region, with unknown effects. The melting permafrost will make it more difficult for us to freeze our food in the traditional ways, and the shifting ground is damaging our sanitation and water supply systems. All of these issues affect Inuit health and well-being, either physically because they threaten the safety of our food and water, or socially and mentally because they threaten the way of life upon which our identity is based.

Experts tell us that climate change may lead to increased economic development of the Arctic. But Inuit know that any economic advantages that may trickle down to us can never compensate for the hugely negative effects of climate change on our health and well-being. Other experts tell us that new technologies can help save us from the negative effects of climate change. Inuit are sceptical about this, but open to exploring the possibilities. We would welcome any new technology that would help us cope with the enormous challenges we face. We are an adaptable and pragmatic people. We have taken on new technologies very quickly when it was in our interest to do so.

But perhaps we are placing most of our hope for the future in effective partnerships that will allow us to make our own contributions to the solutions of world problems and at the same time to protect our way of life as a unique people. We welcome new partnerships with the public sector, the private sector, and other like-minded civil society groups. We recognize the value of working together with others who are knowledgeable in the fields of medicine, epidemiology, political science, and economic development.

How should these partnerships work? We need to consult each other at the early stages of our research. We need to share our knowledge and the results of our research with each other. And most importantly, we need to make a commitment to each other as partners, recognizing that we all have knowledge and skills that we can bring to our joint enterprises. The partnerships we forge should serve the needs of both the scientific community and the Inuit community as we all move forward into an uncertain future.

Recently, a new partnership was forged between Denmark and Greenland, which gives Greenland further autonomy as a nation. It is my hope that my country Greenland will use this new autonomy to very quickly adopt its own climate change policy – which not only reacts to the world's effects on us, but one that demonstrates responsible stewardship of the environment by Inuit as well.

Other partnerships exist and must be strengthened in our march towards the December summit in Copenhagen. The Inuit Circumpolar Council is an active partner with Denmark at the Arctic Council table, and hopes to work closely with the Danish government on matters of climate change especially as it assumes the role of Arctic Council chair this year. ICC's international involvement in many areas, such as the increasing debate over Arctic sovereignty, makes it an important organization for Denmark to work closely with.

To adapt to rapidly changing circumstances, while at the same time preserving important elements of our culture, we as Inuit need to keep one foot in the past and one foot in the present and balance on both feet as we walk into the future. We need to find a balance between old and new ways, between scientific and experience-based knowledge, between change and stability.

And I dare to suggest that the scientific community needs to find a balance too. I believe that scientists also need to have one foot in the present and one foot in the past, balancing their excitement over new knowledge with a respect for the ancient wisdom and experience of Inuit and other indigenous peoples around the world.

As we work together to develop new adaptation methods, I hope Inuit will be supported in our efforts to preserve our cultural heritage. We are not willing to throw out our traditions, and we do not believe that throwing them out would help us become more adaptable. In fact, it is our traditions that give us the strength and the tools we need to adapt. We have a rich, proud tradition of adaptation. And we want to use our own resources and our own methods of adapting whenever possible.

Denmark is considered a world leader in supporting indigenous peoples around the world. It has also been a strong supporter of the Inuit Circumpolar Council by working closely with us, and helping us in our work at the United Nations bodies, such as the UN Human Rights Council, the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, and in drafting the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. ICC has also been an active player in the UNFCCC (United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change) process. We hope that this partnership continues well into the future, but will also build upon the past.

The challenges being forced upon all of us by climate change are immense. We need solutions and we need them urgently. In our avid search for these solutions, I hope we'll remember that the best answers are not always found in the latest and greatest innovations. Sometimes the best answers are found by looking to the past to see what has worked well for hundreds and even thousands of years.