

## 3.3

# Nunavut

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Nunavut is the youngest territory in Canada. It is a region that was born out of a great hope for a new type of society – a society that differs substantially from the standard vision of a western urban one. It was created to both protect a traditional Indigenous lifestyle and culture that has existed for thousands of years and at the same time ensure the people of the region would have the necessary political tools to create a contemporary future according to their needs<sup>1</sup>. It hoped to provide its communities with the tools they needed to help them deal with the historical trauma they have been dealing with over the past 50 years and improve their well-being.

Nunavut as a region does not fit easily into the traditional discussion of rural-urban differences. It is composed of 25 communities that, range in size from 130 people to the capital, Iqaluit, with a population of 6,700<sup>2</sup>. Based on the definition of rural being communities of less than 1000, 75% of the population of Nunavut can be categorized as being urban. Yet, as many studies have shown, the existence of all communities in Nunavut are still heavily dependent economically and culturally on harvesting the benefits of the land and as such can be seen as rural.



From one perspective, these communities have been in existence for a relatively short period of time. Most communities date from the late 1950s to the 1960s. Yet from another perspective they have been in existence for thousands of years – albeit not in fixed locations. The population of the territory is primarily Inuit. Over 85% of the 31,900 people that live in the territory are part of a culture that until the late 1950s and 1960s lived in small mobile groupings which based their existence primarily on hunting and gathering<sup>3</sup>. While the policy of the federal government had been to keep the Inuit of northern Canada “on the land” so as to ensure the protection of their lifestyle, a number of events occurred in the 1950s and 1960s which caused the federal government to reverse this strategy and create a series of central communities where many of the health and education services that other Canadians took for granted, could be provided.

The radical nature of this change, and the structures that were created to manage the change, have created what many are now referring to as a “historical trauma” for these communities. This trauma has resulted in a range of social, cultural, and health issues that represent enormous challenges for the communities of Nunavut. While the creation of Nunavut was seen as a first step in helping these communities deal with these challenges, the first 16 years of existence of Nunavut have shown that, while some improvements are starting to be realized, many obstacles remain.

## Demographics and Human Capital Development

Nunavut as a territory has seen strong demographic growth over the past 20 years<sup>4</sup>. Overall the population has increased from 20,900 in 1991 to 31,900 in 2011, an increase of 52%. Since their creation in the late 1950s and 1960s, the 25 communities of Nunavut have generally all seen increases in their population although there is a great deal of variation in these increases<sup>2</sup>. The greatest single loss of population in a community occurred when the primarily non-indigenous mining community of Nanisivik, created in 1975, closed down about in 2002\*. Since the closure of Nanisivik, all communities in Nunavut have a majority Indigenous population

with only Iqaluit having a non-indigenous population larger than 25% (42%)<sup>5</sup>.

Almost all population growth is due to a natural increase of the Indigenous population. Both in-migration and out-migration is limited primarily to non-indigenous migrants working in the public sector<sup>6</sup>. One result of the importance of natural increase is the fact that the population of communities in Nunavut tend to have a high percentage of youth. In 2006 34% of all people living in these communities were between 0 and 14 years of age compared to a national average of 17.7%<sup>4</sup> There are also relatively few elderly. Only 2.8% of the population of Nunavut were 65 years of age or older in 2006 compared to a national average of 13.7%.

Demographically speaking Nunavut communities can be portrayed as being young and growing. Migration is limited as the Indigenous population of the region display a strong attachment to their home communities. This attachment is perhaps surprising given the many challenges facing these communities. One of the most important is that of education and human capital development. There have been a number of studies highlighting the problems in these communities surrounding education<sup>7,8,9,10</sup>. Improving education is now, and has long been, a concern of people living in the communities of Nunavut. Indeed this concern was one of the reasons for centralization into villages in the 1960s<sup>3</sup>. Yet education continues to be a challenge. While only 15% of the Canadian population between the ages of 25 and 64 in 2006 had less than a high school diploma, this figure was 46% in Nunavut<sup>11</sup>. Low high school graduation rates have long been an issue in Nunavut and recent statistics indicate that the problem may not be improving<sup>12</sup>.

## Governance

The creation of Nunavut has enabled a situation where there is a greater ability of the people of Nunavut to govern themselves. While the territorial government does not yet control some key areas such as natural resource development, they do have considerable powers in other areas<sup>13</sup>. Despite this situation there are still challenges being faced by Nunavut communities in terms of governance. Capacity is an issue in the region<sup>14</sup>. While opportunities exist, the region often does not have the capacity to take advantage of these opportunities. Nunavut has been unable to fill many of its government jobs with Inuit from Nunavut. It is forced to look outside

\* Two other smaller outpost villages in the Bathurst Inlet saw population decline during this period. Umingmaktok went from a population of 53 in 1991 to 5 in 2011 and Bathurst Inlet when from 18 to 0.



the region for people to fill these jobs and often the jobs go unfilled for long periods of time.

The territory is in a unique situation of governance in that while the Government of Nunavut has the responsibilities for the delivery of many services, it is the land claim organization, Nunavut Tunngavik, along with its regional bodies, that control many aspects of economic and social development in the region<sup>15</sup>. Discussions regarding benefits from resource development often take place between land claim organizations and companies with limited involvement of the territorial government.

## Economy

All the communities of Nunavut are based on a “mixed” economy<sup>16</sup>. The traditional subsistence economy has been that which they have relied upon for their survival for thousands of years while the wage economy is relatively recent. In addition, transfers from government and other sources represent an important aspect of the economy. Hunting and gathering activities continue to play an important part of these communities not only from an economic perspective but also from a cultural and social perspective even though official figures show that these activities represent a small, but constant part of gross domestic product in Nunavut<sup>17</sup>. Commercialization around these activities has been possible in some communities<sup>18</sup>, however, pressure from animal rights activists have had a negative impact on attempts to re-invigorate this sector of the economy.

Public sector expenditures represent the most important sector of the economy with 32% of Nunavut’s gross domestic product coming from education, health, and public administration expenditures<sup>17</sup>. Mining is now the next most important sector of the economy following the opening of the Meadowbank Gold Mine in 2010 and the Baffinlands Iron Mine in 2014. Mining continues to be seen as one of the most important sectors for growth in the region. Mining represented 18% of GDP in 2014. Construction, some of it related to mining, represented 16% of GDP.

Arts and crafts production has been, and continues to be, an important part of the economy in several communities especially that of Cape Dorset<sup>19</sup>. New activities that communities are hoping to develop in the region include commercial fishing and tourism<sup>20</sup>. It is interesting to note that communities in Nunavut have expressly attempted to develop a “social



economy” based on traditional values of cooperation and community well-being rather than competition and profit-maximization<sup>21</sup>.

there is also a realization that extractive resource development may be necessary in order to provide the benefits to make this happen.

## Challenges

Despite the growth of these communities and the relative absence of out-migration, the communities themselves face a number of important challenges. Many of them are the result of the rapid change introduced over the past 50 years. More recently many of these challenges are being seen as at least partially the result of historical trauma<sup>22,23,24</sup>. Social issues such as high suicide rates, alcohol and drug abuse, homicide and assault, and family violence are often present in these communities.

Food security is an important issue in Nunavut communities<sup>25,26,27</sup>. Challenges to the traditional economy often limit access to traditional foods. Food costs are often extremely high in the region which makes it difficult for those with little money. Much attention has been devoted to climate change and while it has yet to create challenges in most communities it may represent a future challenge to food security and health<sup>28,29</sup>.

Infrastructure and housing are both important challenges facing communities in Nunavut. The costs of maintaining the normal types of services in these communities that other communities in Canada enjoy are quite high. Energy is an on-going issue with most communities dependent upon costly and unreliable diesel generators. The delivery of water and the collection of waste are dependent on trucks that often breakdown creating sanitation problems. Waste disposal is often a problem and resulted in an uncontrolled fire at the dump facilities in Iqaluit in 2014. Housing is often among the worst in Canada in terms of availability and quality and homelessness is increasing in importance<sup>30</sup>.

While many of these challenges are linked to a difficult past, the most important factor in resolving many of these issues is ensuring a sustainable economic future for these communities. Unemployment is high and many are concerned that there will be few jobs in the future for their children. Mining represents a potential source of employment but many are concerned about both the impact of resource development on the environment and on their communities. There is a strong desire to develop a sustainable future based on the utilization of renewable resources but

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