

September 10, 2020
Inuit Circumpolar Council Canada
Meeting Summary

United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples and the Circumpolar
Inuit Health Steering Committee (CIHSC) Engagement Session

Introduction

On September 10th, 2020, the Circumpolar Inuit Health Steering Committee (CIHSC) met with the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples to discuss the topic of COVID-19 and its impacts on the wellbeing of Inuit communities. Special Rapporteur, Francisco Calí Tzay, has a long history of advocating for all Indigenous Peoples, both in Guatemala and at the level of the United Nations. In the discussion with Mr. Cali Tzay regarding COVID-19, the CIHSC sought to highlight the serious challenges Inuit are facing across all ICC countries (i.e. Alaska, Canada, Greenland, and Chukotka). The information shared during this engagement session contributed to informing the Special Rapporteur's report to the UN General Assembly regarding the impacts COVID-19 on Indigenous Peoples across the globe.

The Special Rapporteur was joined by ICC's International Chair, Dalee Sambo Dorough, the CIHSC's Chair, Minnie Grey, as well as most of the CIHSC members including Tina Decouto (Canada), Gert Mulvad (Greenland), Percy Ballot (Alaska), Mary David (Alaska), Alexander Ivanov (Chukotka), and Raisa Zootova (Chukotka). Additionally, ICC Alaska's Executive Director, Kelly Eningowuk, ICC Chukotka's President, Liubov Taian, and ICC Canada's Health Coordinator, Selma Ford were present.

In her opening remarks, ICC's International Chair, Dalee Sambo Dorough, noted that all CIHSC members have the same objective of safeguarding Inuit communities and maximizing the health and wellness of every Inuk. Acknowledging the Special Rapporteur's forthcoming report on COVID-19 and Indigenous Peoples, she indicated hope that this dialogue could make connections between the global pandemic and the multitude of issues that Indigenous Peoples are facing all over the world at this time.

Regional Updates and Information (for Alaska, Canada, Greenland and Chukotka)

Alaska:

Throughout the session, members provided updates surrounding the situation of COVID-19 and how it has impacted their country and communities which they represent. Mary David, a CIHSC member from Nome, Alaska, shared just how challenging COVID has been in remote and rural areas. There has been a dire need for water and sewer infrastructure, including maintenance of these. For example, she stated that there is a need for \$277.4 million towards water and sewer infrastructure, there are over 370 homes that do not have potable water, 451 homes that lack water and sewer, and five communities with no running water and sewer. Moreover, at the

beginning of the pandemic, there were seven communities which faced a water shortage, and now there are ten communities which face ongoing challenges towards providing adequate services and reliable infrastructure.

Regarding the housing situation in Alaska, member Mary David described some of the highest rates of poverty, overcrowding and substandard homes in Nome, Alaska. Not only is there a high cost of construction, energy and living, with the cost of building a basic home \$600, 000 to \$1,000,000, but there is also a large home shortage. Department of housing has estimated 1386 home shortages in her region, while the population is growing 10-20% each decade, not allowing the housing to keep up with the increasing numbers. On average, there are multiple families and generations in one home, and most of the income being spent on housing.

The rise of COVID-19 has made many individuals adjust to a “new normal”, which has greatly impacted mental and physical wellness, according to Mary David. In Nome, Alaska, most means of transportation are mainly by a small aircraft. For major health issues in a small village, one must travel to the hub community, and anything more serious would have to be addressed 500 air miles away in Anchorage. When the pandemic began to impact the region, it also impacted the method of health care delivery, where most services were offered exclusively by telehealth, and those who did not have access to a phone were provided a phone. Unfortunately, during the pandemic, the community has seen an increase in suicidal behaviour and deaths by suicide. Moreover, an increase in depression and anxiety in individuals due to COVID-19 because of ongoing social isolation.

Not only has COVID-19 altered infrastructure, housing and health-care in the community, but there are ongoing impacts on children and their families. For instance, since the pandemic, Mary David mentioned an increase in sexual and physical abuse, and child neglect cases across the community. Moreover, an increase in domestic violence, which she suggested is a result of travel restrictions that prevents victims from traveling to shelters that are available. Children and families are experiencing a rise of social isolation, economic stress, and depression. Additionally, there is mention of changes to grief and loss because of restrictions on burials and celebrations of life. Although there have been ongoing challenges in the communities, Mary believes that families and individuals have been brought closer together because of it.

Percy Ballot, a CIHSC member representing Anchorage, Alaska, gave an update on the current state of their region. At the time of the conversation, Anchorage had 2346 cases, and 25 deaths, while Alaska had 5891 cases and 42 deaths. In Percy’s community, there were 73 cases total, 41 of them travel related. Although the numbers are worrisome, Percy mentioned the pandemic has allowed new ways of doing things in the region. For instance, families were allowed to isolate at local facilities if needed, and families can go off on the land to help with social distancing.

Canada:

From the start of the pandemic, COVID-19 has highlighted and exasperated current and ongoing human rights situations by many Indigenous, especially Inuit. Tina Decouto, a CIHSC member representing Canada, spoke about how dangerous it could be for COVID to spread to Nunavut, because there are limited tools to isolate and protect the community in issues of housing, and homelessness. For decades, Nunavut has faced massive rates of homelessness and overcrowding, and it masks an even wider homelessness problem. Tina Decouto pointed out how the Senate Standing Committee on Aboriginal Peoples released a report on the housing crisis in Nunavut, describing it as a significant public health emergency. In fact, it identified the need for 3500 units over 10 years ago, and investments have barely kept up. COVID-19 also threatens the position of those living in overcrowded situations.

Moreover, Tina Decouto explained that by looking at how tuberculosis has spread in Nunavut in recent years, it can indicate how quickly COVID-19 could spread if it enters the region. Tuberculosis has been an ongoing danger towards Inuit in Nunavut, with recent studies showing 100 Inuit in Nunavummiut were diagnosed with tuberculosis in 2017.

Within the broad strokes of advocacy, Nunavut Tunngavik Incorporated (NTI) efforts have focused largely on providing Inuit led and Inuit specific community-based health delivery in native language. This has been done through partnerships with other regional Inuit organizations to hold healing gatherings, which bring Inuit from other communities together where they can address trauma and healing together. This is important because for Inuit in Nunavut and Inuit knowledge (IQ), connections with family and community are critical to their wellbeing. Moreover, COVID-19 has impacted the ability to connect with community and family, and it is important to rethink how to support communities in continued healing in the absence of being able to gather in groups. For example, exploring how to provide healing, counselling and trauma online is the new reality of the pandemic.

Along with members from Alaska, Tina Decouto agreed that basic infrastructure like sewage and water facilities are an important topic amongst the impacts of COVID-19. There should be a long-term plan to address basic infrastructure, similarly to how most Canadians have access to. The discussion touches upon how not all Inuit communities have access to safe drinking water, and this is threatened as COVID-19 continues to impact regions.

Minnie Grey, CIHSC's chair, touches upon similarities in which Alaska described as enduring throughout the pandemic in the region of Nunavik. Not only are there over 1000 people on the waiting list for housing, but there are instances of extreme overcrowding which became an issue when the first cases began in community across Nunavik. One community had 15 cases, and they worked hard to ensure the virus did not spread any further. The 15 cases were in one family and household, which demonstrates the issue when large families are living in one household, and how threatening it can be.

Health-care resources and facilities has also been an issue in Nunavik, according to Minnie Grey. In the last 10 years, there have been over 500 cases of tuberculosis. When the pandemic hit, it was hard to provide most regular services and everything had to be put on hold. Additionally, two small hospitals had to undergo major changes, and many services were reduced or had to be reorganized. While the situation caused many changes in delivering health care, regional organizations and leaders came together to prevent more cases from entering the region.

Minnie Grey explained how there have been many changes made in the region to help keep communities safe. Throughout the pandemic, Regional Emergency Preparedness Society was set up and Nunavik Regional Board of Health and Social Services (NRBHSS) was invited to work with them. These groups created multiple guidelines and directives to restrict travel, as well as isolate communities. Local emergency response teams were created in each community, where mayors had weekly zoom and conference calls. Moreover, housing organizations have begun working together to provide COVID-19 sanctioned houses in each community. There has been concentration on preparing for the second wave, such as a chosen location for COVID positive patients to stay, a gymnasium set up with 30 beds, negative pressure tents and other equipment to prepare for COVID-19 treatment. Additionally, food vouchers have been provided to those more vulnerable, gas vouchers were provided to encourage people to get them out on the land.

Similarly to what CIHSC member representing Alaska described, COVID-19 has been difficult in keeping social interactions and traditions alive, where we want to assist and support one another but are restricted. Nonetheless, these dark times have allowed families to come together and to get out on the land, which is seen as a therapeutic way in dealing with COVID-19, as well as assists in food security in the region.

Greenland:

In Greenland, everything has been affected by the pandemic, not just the health system as mentioned by many. Greenland is made up of primarily Inuit, that have 5 regions with a hospital in each region, as well as 17 towns with small health-care facilities, and 18 villages around the coast with more limited resources. Gert Mulvad shared how COVID-19 has brought many changes to these communities. For instance, tourism has been one of the largest incomes in the country, but has been shut down due to the pandemic. Moreover, a lot of income comes from fishery, but having crew come in from other countries has put a risk at bringing COVID-19 into communities. At the beginning of the pandemic, there were 17 confirmed cases of COVID-19 and all of them in Nuuk, and were all travel related. Greenland continues to be under lockdown, and restrictions on international countries, as well as inter-community travel.

In the discussion of Greenland, Gert Mulvad also mentioned how COVID-19 has impacted communities in the same way as other member's countries. COVID-19 continues to have a big impact on cultural activities, especially for young people and recreational time.

Greenland does not have a testing facility, or the capacity to handle infected people. If COVID-19 were to spread in the communities, it would be hard to manage it.

Chukotka:

Chukotka has been impacted by COVID-19 to a lesser degree because of its remoteness in comparison to the other member countries, where it has only affected those needing to come into the region, and not residents of the area. Liubov Taian, ICC's Chukotka President, and Alexander Ivanov and Raisa Zootova, CIHSC members, shared in this discussion the different measures that were implemented in the region and how it impacted the communities. The governor of Chukotka took protective measures to protect the region. In Eastern Chukotka, there were not any cases of COVID-19 among the resident population, and majority of cases in other regions were predominantly tourists and travels from the mainland.

From the beginning of the pandemic, measures were implemented immediately to stop the spread to the remote areas. The government assisted in economic and social support. All public schools were closed, and students transferred to online education. Moreover, oxygen and respiratory equipment were purchased in advance, and testing was done on healthy population as well to monitor the region. Additionally, there is an allocation of 1 vehicle for patients with flu like symptoms.

Raisa Zootova explains that COVID-19 preventative measures were taken in a careful manner to monitor patients who are in isolation. This has allowed hunting, fishing and fathering to continue for Chukotka. Alexander Ivanov explains that despite the virus, life has continued with natural way of life.

Special Rapporteur Francisco Cali Tzay

Following the updates of COVID-19 that members provided on their region, Special Rapporteur Francisco Cali Tzay confirmed that this information is reflected in the report to the General Assembly. Mr. Cali Tzay supports the dialogue between members on how all Indigenous Peoples across the globe are impacted by the pandemic. Particularly, he stated that has been a high number of suicides that are taking place in Indigenous communities, especially in the United States and Canada. Moreover, he argued that it is the isolation and not the virus itself, that is increasing this risk. He also stated that he plans to do a follow up study on COVID-19 next year.

Furthermore, Mr. Cali Tzay argued that youth are playing a big role in passing the message about the pandemic in Indigenous languages, because most available COVID-19 information is only available in the official languages. This pandemic has also magnified the gap between rich and poor during this time, that has impacted Indigenous communities in various regions.

Closing Remarks

At the end of the engagement session, ICC's International Chair, Dalee Sambo Dorough, left the Special Rapporteur, and CIHSC and ICC members with a few words. She shared that it is evident that there is an extraordinary diversity between the countries, but at the same time, many face the same problems, which are shared amongst Indigenous Peoples' everywhere. Moreover, a common issue that is seen in our members' countries, is the uneven treatment within our distinctive political arenas.

Dalee Sambo Dorough, gave thanks to the Special Rapporteur for attending this engagement session, and looks forward to the report and any future collaboration of other issues. Minnie Grey and Selma Ford agreed to keep Mr. Cali Tzay updated on the 2021 Health Summit and other important documents from CIHSC.