



McGill Institute for the Study of Canada: Canada on the Global Stage  
Okalik Eegeesiak | McGill Institute, Quebec, Canada | February 12, 2016

## **Inuit, the Arctic and Global Forces: Can Inuit Help Save the Planet**

(check against delivery)

Ullukkut.

Good morning. My name is Okalik Eegeesiak. I would like to thank the organizers of the Canada on the World Stage Conference for the invitation to participate today with such distinguished colleagues. I was born and raised in Iqaluit on the shores of Frobisher Bay, Nunavut. My community has grown as has the interest in the Arctic -- from a small outpost with no roads -- to a city with paved roads and traffic jams -- something unheard of in the Arctic even a few years ago. This growth is reflected across the Arctic. Things are changing and changing fast.

Let me begin by saying that Inuit are an international people. As the International Chair of the Inuit Circumpolar Council (ICC), ICC gives voice to more than 160,000 Inuit in Chukotka, Alaska, Canada and Greenland and as such we engage in a variety of multilateral fora including the Arctic Council and the United Nations among others.

Inuit formally organized in 1977 creating the Inuit Circumpolar Conference -- now the Inuit Circumpolar Council - to deal with issues on environment, economic and global challenges which we saw were impacting our communities. Since then, we have dealt with many different governments with different priorities and changing policies. However, our issues have remained the same -- concern for the environment, wildlife, education, and healthy communities. Basically, social and economic well-being and a vision for the betterment of Inuit and our communities.

Inuit live in four countries with four very different political realities and relationships with the state. Alaska Natives have settled land claims which provides compensation however, governance and hunting and fishing rights were not addressed in the agreement and they are still working towards recognition of their rights. In 2009 Greenland HomeRule government was replaced with self government, Chukotka has an emerging governance relationship with Moscow, and Canada has settled all four Inuit land claim agreements and is on a new path to partnership with the Liberal Government's pledge as articulated in Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's mandate letters, "No relationship is more important to me and to Canada than the one with Indigenous Peoples".

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One of the most important fora Inuit engage internationally in, is the Arctic Council. The Council is a model which works to combine our collective knowledge and address important Arctic issues. The Council is comprised of the eight Arctic states, six indigenous permanent participants, twelve non-Arctic observer states, nine intergovernmental and inter parliamentary organizations and eleven non-governmental organizations. The 2013 EU application for observer status was received affirmatively, but a final decision was deferred.

The importance of the Arctic Council is that Arctic Indigenous Peoples including Inuit sit at the table with states.

It is said that, “Boundaries between disciplines are largely artificial, and addressing the world’s problems requires combining knowledge in new ways.” This resonated with me because of our experience within the Arctic Council. I would suggest that boundaries between countries and people are largely artificial and by communicating and listening and learning from each other -- by combining our collective knowledge in new ways -- we can find solutions to anything.

Three elements make the Arctic Council a success: 1) ACCESS, indigenous peoples are at the Arctic Council table; 2) KNOWLEDGE, combining collective knowledge makes certain that decisions are based on evidence; and, 3) POLITICS, having transparent and supportive government.

Inuit are part of the broader family of indigenous peoples. We identify ourselves as hunters. Subsistence hunting and our rights to cultural practices defines us.

Issues of sovereignty and sovereign rights in the Arctic have become tightly linked to issues of self-determination. Inuit and Arctic states must, therefore, work together closely and constructively to chart the future of the Arctic. In 2009 Inuit adopted a ***Circumpolar Inuit Declaration on Sovereignty in the Arctic*** which articulates the Inuit vision of Arctic sovereignty.

Within the United Nations we have the 2007 ***Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples***. It is not a legally binding treaty but it does “*represent the dynamic development of international legal norms and it reflects the commitment of the UN's member states to move in certain directions*”; the UN describes it as setting “*an important standard for the treatment of the world's 370 million [indigenous peoples](#)*.” Article 43 of UNDRIP articulates the rights that “*constitute the minimum standards for the survival, dignity and well-being of the indigenous peoples of the world*.”

The Crown already has a constitutionally protected “duty to consult” with aboriginal peoples on issues that might affect their interests, but UNDRIP goes further and calls on governments to obtain “free, prior and informed consent,” including when it comes to natural resources development. The idea that this could turn into a veto was one of the concerns that Canada — under the previous government of Conservative prime minister Stephen Harper — cited as a reason for its opposition to signing UNDRIP. Prime Minister Justin Trudeau told his new cabinet ministers in their [mandate letters](#): “*No relationship is more important to me and to Canada*

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*than the one with Indigenous Peoples.”* In November 2014, Indigenous and Northern Affairs Minister Carolyn Bennett announced the new Liberal government will rebuild the relationship with First Nations, Métis and Inuit peoples by including them in every decision that affects them and their land and they will implement UNDRIP.

Last December in Paris at the UN Climate talks, I led a delegation of Inuit leaders and youth to bring our voice to the international table. We worked hard to negotiate – for real action – and although the outcome was better than expected, the final agreement is only a global life raft. We used UNDRIP to encourage the inclusion of language on the “rights” of indigenous peoples was in the operative paragraphs – we sought such assurance in the core of the Agreement, which is legally binding. In the end the language was ONLY included in both the **preamble** to the Decision Document where it acknowledges the unique and differentiated rights of Indigenous Peoples - but the language is weak. The language allows for member states to pivot their interpretation on national legislation and not upon international human rights standards and respective obligations under international law. One can still make the argument that the UN Declaration is relevant, but this wording stifles the UN Declaration’s direct relevance and creates a barrier for Indigenous peoples.

As the climate talks concluded, every major news article on the Paris agreement featured a photo of the Arctic at the same time Singapore had convened an Arctic shipping conference where they, China, India, S Korea and others noted they have an eye on opening routes across the Arctic Ocean [due to climate change], it was difficult to simultaneously watch this and see how hard it was for Inuit to make the world understand the Arctic sea ice is our Nunaat – our home – our right. The small gains we made however, were supported by the new Liberal Government – having only been elected to office -- announced on the issue of climate change, “we are back” and their actions in Paris supported this.

I want to leave you with three key points to consider during our roundtable discussion: 1) the Arctic is not empty there is a great deal of established governance structures; 2) global interest in the Arctic is largely driven by commodity prices; and, 3) Inuit do not intend to be museum displays we intend to not just survive but thrive in the changing Arctic.

In closing Inuit are pragmatic we want to work with others – Roald Amundsen saw the global value of the knowledge Inuit had and he embraced it and it led to his success not only in the Arctic but to become the first man to reach the south pole.

Thank you



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