



## **National Aboriginal Women's Summit – *Strong Women, Strong Communities* June 20 – 22, 2007 Corner Brook, NL**

**Theme: *HEALTH, SAFETY AND WELLNESS***

**Issue Paper: *POVERTY***

Over the last 50 years, Inuit have experienced an unparalleled rate of cultural change. The shift has been from isolated, family-based economic groups that relied on subsistence hunting and fishing and seasonal relocation, to populations that now live in permanent settlements and rely, in part, on a wage economy. This change was enforced on the Inuit population with no transition plan to ease the tremendous impact.

The majority of the Inuit in Canada live in 53 remote Arctic communities, extending from the Alaskan border to the eastern shores of Labrador. The communities are accessible only by air and this is an important factor with respect to access to medical services and consumer goods. Social and medical facilities are limited in many communities.

- Between 1996 and 2001, Canadian Inuit experienced a **population growth** rate of 12 per cent – this is four times the rate of Canada's non-Aboriginal population. This growth is due to high fertility rates and an increasing life expectancy. Nonetheless, Inuit can expect to live about ten years less than people living in southern Canada.
- Compared to the rest of the country, **Inuit families are younger and larger**. Census data indicates that over half the Inuit population is less than 25 years of age. In comparison, only 32% of Canada's non-Aboriginal population is under 25. Inuit now have an average age of just 20 years. For Canada's non-Aboriginal population, the average age is about 38 years.
- Inuit women are having children at an early age and tend to have large families – larger families than either First Nations or non-Aboriginal women. **Teen pregnancy** is a very real and serious problem. In 2000, in some Inuit regions the pregnancy rate for young women aged 15 to 19 was over four times the national rate.
- It is clear that Inuit families are facing challenges that are extremely daunting. Not all have access to nutritious food, adequate and safe shelter, and fully equipped and staffed health care facilities – services that are readily available in southern Canada. The costs for these goods and services are also extreme.

- **Quality food can be very expensive** in the North. Junk food is cheaper because it is often lighter and therefore less expensive to ship. Manufactured and processed foods also have a long shelf life. In Paulatuk, a small community in the western Arctic, food prices have been calculated to be 470 percent higher than in Ottawa.
- A 2005 Statistics Canada survey found that 56 per cent of Nunavut respondents stated that they – or someone in their household – had **lacked the money** over the past year to eat the quality or variety of the food they had wanted, or had worried about not having enough to eat, or had actually not had enough to eat. Insufficient food — either quality or quantity — can lead to vitamin and mineral deficiencies, and to even more serious health problems.
- Though **average income levels** may suggest good wages, this is not a fair measure of economic well-being. For example, a review of year 2000 income levels reported by Statistics Canada for all persons with a job indicates that for the whole of Canada the average income was just under \$32,000. In Nunavut the average income is just over \$28,000 which is higher than for the Atlantic region, and for Manitoba and Saskatchewan. But this income is off-set by the high cost of living.
- Overall, **unemployment rates** among Inuit are far above the national average. In 2001, over 40 percent of Inuit men in rural areas were unemployed. Yet in Inuit regions, job opportunities abound in the larger communities, but they are generally filled by other Canadians or immigrants, because Inuit cannot meet the job qualifications.
- **Housing in Inuit Communities** is in crisis. Overcrowding is a major problem. Construction and utility costs are high in the Arctic and employment rates can be low so families often double or triple up. Housing construction costs have been estimated to be three times higher than for similar housing in the South. Ownership rates are one-third the national rate. A recent government study found that more than one-half of Inuit live in crowded conditions. Some 3-bedroom homes are known to house as many as 20 people.

Thus there is an on-going and severely under-addressed crisis that has widespread consequences:

- A lack of privacy and space contributes to increased stress, increased violence, and low self-esteem. The housing crisis exacerbates social issues. Family violence, child sexual abuse, and substance abuse have been linked to the dehumanizing housing conditions.
- Overcrowding causes much higher incidences of communicable diseases such as tuberculosis, Hepatitis A, pneumonia, and other respiratory diseases. This results in increased infant mortality and shorter life spans for many Inuit.
- Inadequate housing also contributes to the high injury rates, especially among Inuit children and youth.
- Conditions are often sub-standard in what is typically one of the harshest environments in the world. This is true of plumbing and sewage disposal. Air quality and mould are major problems; ventilation in northern homes is poor to non-existent.
- The design of houses does not take Inuit cultural practices into account.
- The housing crisis contributes to domestic violence. If a domestic problem erupts, there is nowhere to go — other houses in the community are equally crowded and most communities do not have women's shelters. Women and children stay in abusive homes because they

literally have nowhere else to go. In Nunavut it is estimated that only 29% of spousal abuse cases are reported. Nunavut has 6.5 times the national reported spousal abuse rate — the highest in Canada.

- Once an Inuit woman leaves an abusive household, she may lose custody of her children. Sometimes child welfare and child custody decisions made by southern social workers are not culturally appropriate. Inuit mothers are losing custody of their children to non-Inuit parents when they separate or divorce. To prevent this, mothers succumb to the pressure to preserve the family unit and protect the children.
- The suicide rate among Inuit is one of the highest in the world — it is particularly high among teenagers and young adults. Inuit youth commit suicide at a rate six times the national average. In some regions the rate has doubled over the past decade.

**Education:** The chance that an Inuk child will complete grade 12 is low. Currently figures from Nunavut indicate that for every 100 children entering kindergarten, only 25 will complete grade 12. Throughout Nunavut, almost 52% of those over 25 never completed high school. Some communities do not even have a high school. Students must therefore move to a larger community if they want to continue schooling.

Throughout the North there is a need for Inuit with **professional skills**. The health profession, for example, is plagued with vacant positions and high staff turnover. Inuit are needed to fill this gap. They know the culture, speak Inuktitut, and will remain in the community. Inuit with a post-secondary education have a wide selection of job opportunities. However, only three percent (3%) of Inuit currently have a university degree.

Poverty strongly affects the overall **health status** of Inuit.

## **Recommendations**

1. Collaboration is a two-way process and Inuit need the support – both financial and human – to solve the problems of poverty and development in the North;
2. As a starting point, early childhood development programs and quality education programs are essential;
3. Training programs must be developed to encourage Inuit professional capacity-. It is essential that students receive financial and practical support to care for children/ families while studying;
4. Research into substance abuse programs that work for Inuit, and funding to implement them. Also, a public education program in the schools to influence children at a very young age;
5. New solutions must be found for financial issues. For small entrepreneurs in isolated communities, practical access to banking services and financial credit can be a barrier. Micro-credit is a tool particularly well suited to tiny, one-person enterprises, especially those initiated by women. It is gaining attention world-wide and worthy of assessment in a northern context. Cooperative banking is another alternative to be explored.