

# **The Use of Inuit *Qaujimajatuqangit* (Inuit Indigenous Knowledge) to meet Paris Agreement Climate Change Adaptation Obligations in the Circumpolar North**

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**THE USE OF INUIT QAUJIMAJATUQANGIT (INUIT INDIGENOUS  
KNOWLEDGE) TO MEET PARIS AGREEMENT CLIMATE CHANGE  
ADAPTATION OBLIGATIONS IN THE CIRCUMPOLAR NORTH**

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**Abstract:** This essay advocates for the preservation and use of indigenous knowledge for the purpose of tackling climate change and upholding human rights. It is founded on primary research in the form of interviews, analysis of existing scholarship in the field, and a critical evaluation of current law. This essay will argue that the preservation and use of Inuit Indigenous knowledge (Inuit *Qaujimajatuqangit*) is essential for effective, efficient, and just implementation of the Paris Agreement; it is imperative that world leaders adopt an indigenised and decolonised approach to climate change law. It aims to amplify the voices of indigenous people seeking to address climate change through the use of indigenous knowledge. This work will be of interest to scholars in the field, climate change policymakers, and climate change and human rights activists.

**Keywords:**

*Adaptation — Climate Change — Climate Justice — Decolonialisation —*

*Human Rights — Indigenous Knowledge — Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit — Paris Agreement*

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*“We’re often known as the face of climate change, but we are also the mind, the backbone, and the soul to climate change solutions.”*

Adelaine Ahmasuk, ICC.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Adelaine Ahmasuk, ICC, Inuit Perspectives Panel (WWF Pavilion, COP26, 4 November 2021).

## Introduction

This essay seeks to represent an Inuit position on adaptation in the Circumpolar North. It supports the preservation and use of Inuit Indigenous knowledge (Inuit *Qaujimajatuqangit*) as a tool to implement the adaptation commitments made under the Paris Agreement. After setting out the relevant legal obligations, challenges faced by Inuit as a result of the ineffective implementation of these obligations will be noted. This essay will highlight the saliency of putting Inuit *Qaujimajatuqangit* at the centre of climate change governance and will conclude with a call for leaders at COP27 to adopt several recommendations in addition to those made by the Inuit Circumpolar Council ('ICC')<sup>3</sup>.

Due to the nature and subject matter of this essay, primary research was conducted to ensure that the position set out is representative, accurate, and contemporary. I would like to offer sincere thanks to Victoria Qunnuq Buschman, Adelaine Ahmasuk, and Brian Pottle of the Inuit Knowledge, Innovation and Infrastructure Panel<sup>4</sup> for their insights. I am grateful to have had the opportunity to conduct interviews and would like to extend particular gratitude to Crystal Martin-Lapenskie<sup>5</sup> and Thomas Brose<sup>6</sup> for their generosity of time, knowledge, and input. In addition to this primary research, my methodology includes an assessment of secondary literature.

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<sup>3</sup> ICC, 'Position Paper' (28 October 2021).

<sup>4</sup> ICC Panel, Inuit Knowledge, Innovation and Infrastructure – Inuit youth perspectives on infrastructure for adaptation and resilience (COP26, Glasgow, 3 November 2021).

<sup>5</sup> Interview with Crystal Martin-Lapenskie, Consultant, ICC (Glasgow, 3 November 2021).

<sup>6</sup> Interview with Thomas Brose, Executive Director, Climate Alliance (Glasgow/Frankfurt via Zoom, 4 November 2021).

## Problems Facing Inuit due to Climate Change

Inuit have documented numerous significant changes in their environment as a result of climate change, including weather patterns<sup>7</sup>, decreased safety on the ice<sup>8</sup>, food insecurity<sup>9</sup>, housing<sup>10</sup>, and ill health.<sup>11</sup> Some have migrated to adapt; however, as a result of this significant lifestyle change, many now face unemployment, mental illness, and addiction.<sup>12</sup>

These consequences can be directly attributed to the disproportionate carbon contributions of industrialised states;<sup>13</sup> while contributing negligible emissions, indigenous communities are suffering some of the most severe impacts of climate change. Additionally, while representing less than 5% of the global population, indigenous people manage over 25% of the world's land and act as guardians of 80% of the world's biodiversity.<sup>14</sup> It is therefore imperative that indigenous people and their knowledge is centred in climate change law and governance negotiations.

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<sup>7</sup> Sansoulet, et al, 'An update on Inuit perceptions of their changing environment, Qikiqtaaluk (Baffin Island, Nunavut)' (2020) 8(20) Elem Sci Anth, 8.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Rall and LaFortune, "My Fear is Losing Everything" The Climate Crisis and First Nations' Right to Food in Canada' (Human Rights Watch, 2020), < [www.hrw.org/report/2020/10/21/my-fear-losing-everything/climate-crisis-and-first-nations-right-food-canada#1445](https://www.hrw.org/report/2020/10/21/my-fear-losing-everything/climate-crisis-and-first-nations-right-food-canada#1445) > accessed 29 October 2021.

<sup>10</sup> Hohmann, 'Igloo as Icon: A Human Rights Approach to Climate Change for the Inuit' (2009) 18 Transnational Law & Cotemporary Problems 295.

<sup>11</sup> ICC Canada, 'Circumpolar Inuit Health Priorities: Best Health Practices and Research Report to Health Canada (Northern Region)' (2012).

<sup>12</sup> Minority Rights Group International, 'Minority and Indigenous Trends 2019: Focus on climate justice' (Minority Rights Group International, 2019), < <https://minorityrights.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/MRG-Key-Trends-Report-2019-FINAL-1.pdf> > accessed 29 October 2021.

<sup>13</sup> Ritchie et al., 'CO2 and Greenhouse Gas Emissions' (Our World in Data, 2020), < <https://ourworldindata.org/co2-emissions#citation> > accessed 17 July 2022.

<sup>14</sup> National Geographic, 'Indigenous Peoples Defend Earth's Biodiversity – But They're in Danger' (National Geographic, 16 November 2018), < [www.nationalgeographic.com/environment/article/can-indigenous-land-stewardship-protect-biodiversity-](https://www.nationalgeographic.com/environment/article/can-indigenous-land-stewardship-protect-biodiversity-) > accessed 17 July 2022.

## Ineffective Implementation of Paris Agreement Obligations

The negotiation of the Paris Agreement at COP21 in 2015 brought hope, with promise of increased funding, capacity building, mitigation, and adaptation projects. While the Paris Agreement has had some success, it has failed to live up to its expectations regarding issues specific to indigenous communities.

Article 7 of the Paris Agreement (which sets out adaptation obligations), Article 9 (which sets out financial obligations), and Article 14 (which sets out obligations arising in relation to the Global Stocktake) are essential for effective climate justice and adaptation. Below, the implementation of each will be analysed.

### Article 7: Adaptation

Per Article 7(5), Parties must undertake adaptive action that considers “vulnerable groups, communities and ecosystems, and should be based on and guided by [...] traditional knowledge, knowledge of indigenous peoples and local knowledge systems.” The efforts of developed countries in furtherance of these obligations have thus far been lacking. Insufficient heed has been paid to the explicit requirements to ensure indigenous people and their knowledge are at the forefront of climate change governance. This is especially pertinent given that vulnerable grounds, communities and ecosystems often overlap with indigenous communities; climate change law and governance must recognise this intersectionality and respond accordingly.

Inuit have highlighted that there remains a belief that they lack intelligence and that this is perhaps why Inuit *Qaujimajatuqangit* has not been taken seriously.<sup>15</sup> An example of this was highlighted by Dr. Ian Mauro.<sup>16</sup> During the course of his research for the *Qapirangajuq: Inuit Knowledge and Climate Change* documentary,<sup>17</sup> many Inuit interviewees from across Nunavut stated that they had observed Earth shifting on its axis in recent years. This was dismissed as a mirage – the Novaya Zemlya effect.<sup>18</sup> 10 years later, in 2021, it was discovered that the Inuit had been correct: in the 1990s, the Earth shifted on its axis as a result of shifting water due to climate change.<sup>19</sup>

Anishinaabe-European PhD candidate Graeme Reed recalls an Elder in Carcross, Yukon, Canada, highlighting the difficulty with indigenous knowledge integration into Western scientific spheres: “How do you fit a round peg into a square hole? You make it smaller.”<sup>20</sup> Global climate policy makers cannot afford to take a reductionist approach to knowledge integration: indigenous people are not merely sources of data but should be centred as part of a decolonised approach to climate change policy.<sup>21</sup>

As a result of insufficient consideration of indigenous knowledge, Inuit and other indigenous communities have faced several difficulties as they have tried to action adaptation projects.

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<sup>15</sup> Brian Pottle.

<sup>16</sup> Mauro, ‘The Tilting of the Earth Changes Everything’ (Isuma TV, 25 November 2009), < [www.isuma.tv/inuit-knowledge-and-climate-change/tilted-earth-has-changed-everything](http://www.isuma.tv/inuit-knowledge-and-climate-change/tilted-earth-has-changed-everything) > accessed 16 July 2022.

<sup>17</sup> Mauro, ‘Inuit Knowledge and Climate Change’ (Isuma TV, 4 February 2011), < [www.isuma.tv/inuit-knowledge-and-climate-change/movie-no-subtitles](http://www.isuma.tv/inuit-knowledge-and-climate-change/movie-no-subtitles) > accessed 16 July 2022.

<sup>18</sup> Lehn, ‘The Novaya Zemlya effect: An arctic mirage’ (1979) 69(5) J. Opt. Soc. Am. 776.

<sup>19</sup> Deng et al., *Polar Drift in the 1990s Explained by Terrestrial Water Storage Changes* (2021) 48(7) Geophysical Research Letters; Anderson, ‘What are Indigenous Knowledge Systems – and How Can They Help Fight Climate Change’ (TVO Today, 30 September 2021), < [www.tvo.org/article/what-are-indigenous-knowledge-systems-and-how-can-they-help-fight-climate-change](http://www.tvo.org/article/what-are-indigenous-knowledge-systems-and-how-can-they-help-fight-climate-change) > accessed 16 July 2022.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

These challenges include Western paternalism, a lack of (or misdirected) attention<sup>22</sup>, and a lack of (or misdirected) funds.<sup>23</sup> This was recognised by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) in their 2022 report: “There is increasing evidence of adaptation that has caused unintended consequences, for example destroying nature, putting peoples’ lives at risk or increasing greenhouse gas emissions. This can be avoided by involving everyone in planning, attention to equity and justice, and drawing on Indigenous and local knowledge.”<sup>24</sup> This recognition is welcomed and should be reflected in the COP27 negotiations.

### Article 9: Finances

Article 9(4) sets out that financial support for adaptation should consider “those that are particularly vulnerable to the adverse effects of climate change.” In respect of Inuit and other indigenous people, the fulfilment of this obligation has thus far been lacking.

The COP26 Inuit Knowledge, Innovation and Infrastructure Panel emphasised that one of the central adaptation issues is the funding of infrastructure which includes proper consultation with Inuit to ensure its efficacy, longevity, and cultural appropriateness.<sup>25</sup> Many infrastructure issues were identified by Panel. First, search and rescue systems are under increasing pressure due to decreased ice safety. As melting patterns become more unpredictable and ice is thinning and melting patterns become more unpredictable, Inuit are falling through the ice at an increasing rate. This is especially worrying given the lack of adaptation infrastructure.

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<sup>22</sup> Tam et al., ‘Climate Change Totems and Discursive Hegemony Over the Arctic’ (2021) 6 *Frontiers in Communication*.

<sup>23</sup> The Inuit Knowledge, Innovation and Infrastructure Panel.

<sup>24</sup> IPCC, ‘Press Release: Climate change: a threat to human wellbeing and health of the planet’ (28 February 2022), < [www.ipcc.ch/report/ar6/wg2/resources/press/press-release](http://www.ipcc.ch/report/ar6/wg2/resources/press/press-release) > accessed 16 July 2022.

<sup>25</sup> Adelaine Ahmasuk.



Greenland, for example, has only one search and rescue helicopter.<sup>26</sup> Without sufficient funds and systems, Inuit lives are at a direct risk due to climate change.<sup>27</sup> Second, housing is under threat due to rising temperatures. As permafrost melts, the ground moves. Previously stable foundations are becoming volatile, causing housing cracks.<sup>28</sup> This problem is exacerbated by the fact that some housing projects funded by foreign investors failed to properly consult locals and have inadvertently built upon particularly unstable land.<sup>29</sup> Third, only local Inuit know the location of some culturally important sites, such as unmarked burial grounds. This knowledge has relevance for adaptation projects, development projects, and displacement.<sup>30</sup> Without this knowledge, even well-meaning foreign investors risk destroying Inuit culture. The Inuit Knowledge, Innovation and Infrastructure Panel also highlighted the importance of not forcing development on indigenous people just for the sake of development. For example, there are plans (despite the UNDRIP right to indigenous demilitarisation<sup>31</sup>) to build a military base in Sitqasuaq, Alaska. This development will cause noise disruption and pollution, further disturbing traditional hunting methods in this area.<sup>32</sup>

A central difficulty with adaptation is the sourcing of significant funds with long-term commitments: under a capitalist framework, investments are unlikely unless they can provide a return for investors.<sup>33</sup> When asked about infrastructure adaptation finance strategies, Crystal Martin-Lapenskie emphasised that before Inuit can begin to negotiate the specifics of finance, they must first be granted a seat at the negotiation table.<sup>34</sup> She highlighted that Indigenous knowledge is invaluable to both the indigenous groups themselves in ensuring effective

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<sup>26</sup> Victoria Qunnuq Buschman.

<sup>27</sup> Crystal Martin-Lapenskie.

<sup>28</sup> Brian Pottle.

<sup>29</sup> Victoria Qunnuq Buschman.

<sup>30</sup> Crystal Martin-Lapenskie.

<sup>31</sup> United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (2007).

<sup>32</sup> Crystal Martin-Lapenskie.

<sup>33</sup> Adelaine Ahmasuk, The Inuit Knowledge, Innovation and Infrastructure Panel.

<sup>34</sup> Interview with Crystal Martin-Lapenskie.

adaptation, and to Western actors as a source of information for developing a sustainable lifestyle; “you cannot put a price on Inuit knowledge.”<sup>35</sup> Specifically, as the ICC has proposed, Inuit must be made central figures on the IPCC to ensure sufficient attention is paid to the knowledge of indigenous people.<sup>36</sup> While the importance of indigenous knowledge has been recognised by the IPCC with regards to the issue of forest preservation,<sup>37</sup> sufficient recognition has not yet occurred with indigenous communities in other environments, such as Inuit. Doing so would allow more tailored and effective strategies to be implemented, as required under the Paris Agreement.<sup>38</sup>

#### Article 14: Global Stocktake

Article 14 of the Paris Agreement sets out the obligations regarding the Global Stocktake (GST). It requires the “best available science” to be used in its assessments. This should include Indigenous knowledge. As Centre for International Environmental Law (CIEL) has argued in its 2022 Briefing Note, “the right to Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC) should apply to projects designed to mitigate and adapt to the climate crisis, and the GST should take into account to what extent this is a reality in the implementation of the Paris Agreement.”<sup>39</sup> The FPIC of indigenous people prior to the implementation of adaptation and mitigation measures is imperative to prevent inadvertent ill effects as noted above, e.g. the housing projects on unstable land.

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> ICC, ‘Position Paper’ (28 October 2021).

<sup>37</sup> IPCC Response, ‘Press Release: Major Climate and Land Report Marks First Time UN IPCC Recognizes Indigenous and Community Land Rights as Vital to Slowing Climate Crisis’ (8 August 2019), < <https://ipccresponse.org/press-release> > accessed 16 July 2022.

<sup>38</sup> Paris Agreement, Article 11.

<sup>39</sup> CIEL, ‘Promoting Human Rights in Climate Action: A Global Stocktake Informed by Human Rights’ (February 2022).

## Evaluation

The Western world cannot effectively tackle climate change without understanding indigenous perspectives; by providing financial assistance to indigenous people, Western investors can gain knowledge in return.<sup>40</sup> Indigenous knowledge should not be treated as a commodity that can be bought; however, it can act as an incentive for Western actors to assist with adaptation. Some indigenous societies have a vastly different approach to the relationship between law and nature. In several countries such as Ecuador,<sup>41</sup> Bolivia,<sup>42</sup> and New Zealand,<sup>43</sup> nature is treated as a legal person with rights under the constitution. Western societies cannot effectively stop climate change if we continue to view the environment as a commodity that can either be exploited or preserved. Instead, we must view it as a being, alongside which we exist and upon which we depend. Indigenous societies have lived sustainably for millennia and there is much to be learned from their societal systems.<sup>44</sup> It is therefore imperative that their knowledge is preserved and used.

The use of Inuit *Qaujimajatuqangit* also helps to prevent resources from being wasted. Effective and efficient adaptation strategies are required for climate justice, but the act of putting Inuit knowledge at the centre of climate strategy is itself an act of climate justice. The particular difficulty with the importance of Inuit *Qaujimajatuqangit* is that the longer it is

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<sup>40</sup> Interview with Thomas Brose.

<sup>41</sup> Constitution of 2008, Chapter 7.

<sup>42</sup> Law of the Rights of Mother Earth (2010).

<sup>43</sup> Berros, 'Challenges for the Implementation of the Rights of Nature: Ecuador and Bolivia as the First Instances of an Expanding Movement' (2021) 48(3) *Latin American Perspectives* 192; Kauffman and Martin, 'Constructing Rights of Nature Norms in the US, Ecuador, and New Zealand' (2018) 18(4) *Global Environmental Politics* 43; Knauf, 'Conceptualizing Human Stewardship in the Anthropocene: The Rights of Nature in Ecuador, New Zealand and India' (2018) 31 *Journal of Agricultural and Environmental Ethics* 703; Laastad, 'Nature as a Subject of Rights? National Discourses on Ecuador's Constitutional Rights of Nature' (2019) 47(3) *Forum for Development Studies* 401; Neto and Lima, 'Rights of Nature: The Biocentric Spin in the 2008 Constitution of Ecuador' (2016) 13 *Veredas do Direito* 111; Tanasescu, 'The Rights of Nature in Ecuador: The Making of an Idea' (2013) 70(6) *International Journal of Environmental Studies* 846.

<sup>44</sup> Interview with Thomas Brose.

ignored, the more it disappears.<sup>45</sup> The effects of unaddressed climate change are resulting in increased emigration of Inuit youth, and with it the loss of cultural knowledge. It is therefore imperative that Inuit *Qaujimajatuqangit* is preserved and used as a matter of urgency.

## Conclusion

This essay has shown that Inuit and other indigenous people are suffering from the effects of industrialised states damaging the global environment; it is unjust (under the polluter pays principle)<sup>46</sup> that they should not receive the appropriate funds and resources. This essay has highlighted the saliency of ensuring an indigenised and decolonised approach to climate change adaptation strategies, both for the benefit of indigenous people and of other actors. This essay therefore calls upon leaders at COP27, as a matter of urgency, to:

- I) Recognise the value of Inuit and other indigenous knowledge for effective, efficient, and just adaptation.
- II) Ensure the meaningful inclusion of Inuit and other indigenous people in negotiations and research.<sup>47</sup>
- III) Use Inuit and other indigenous knowledge to its fullest extent in the IPCC assessment process and Paris Agreement GTS.
- IV) Make high-value, long-term, culturally and environmentally appropriate investments in indigenous-led adaptation projects in indigenous societies.

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<sup>45</sup> Baraniuk, 'The Inuit knowledge vanishing with the ice' (BBC Conservation, 12th October 2021) < [www.bbc.com/future/article/20211011-the-inuit-knowledge-vanishing-with-the-ice](http://www.bbc.com/future/article/20211011-the-inuit-knowledge-vanishing-with-the-ice) > accessed 29 October 2021.

<sup>46</sup> Report of the UN Conference on Environment and Development, Annex 1 (Rio, 1992), Principle 16.

<sup>47</sup> ICC, 'Position Paper' (28 October 2021).

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