

NRF Report

## **Breakout session**

Group 1, Thursday, September 25, 2008

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Although the theme for this session was the *new* geography of the warming north, the overarching theme of our breakout session seemed to emphasize the *disconnected* geographies of the north.

When ensuring that traditional knowledge is used in the most respectful and holistic way possible, the level it enters the project matters. It is important that it be used early in the project planning. Time, trust, and relationships are key in northern research. It is not enough to just use indigenous knowledge because it is a good data source. The definition of a project needs to begin with the community, but this may not happen as much as it should because of the problem of funding, which traditionally must be applied in advance for a specific project. There is usually not funding to just go and live with the community to figure out what they want to study first. This is slowly changing though, some funding projects that encourage this are emerging. In Alaska, it is almost impossible to do research in the old way of just going in with your idea: community involvement is absolutely necessary to do research, and proposals are initiated by the community. It requires a shift in ways of thinking and academic processes.

This also relates to how to bring together the physical sciences with indigenous knowledge. We discussed the question of terminology, traditional/indigenous verses local knowledge. In trying to give uniqueness to northern indigenous groups as possessing traditional knowledge (TK) passed down through elders, we end up ignoring or forgetting that *all* cultures and societies have their own form of TK and elders. A possible way around this issue is to speak of local knowledge rather than TK or indigenous knowledge, as the latter terms alienate a lot of people by implying knowledge is absent elsewhere. From one angle, it seems we have TK to show the difference from the quantitative knowledge of science. But what is the difference between TK and qualitative study

methods? If we view TK as qualitative research, and ask of it the same methodological demands, this may help bridge the gap. Of course, it must also be remembered that there may be different worldviews, values or assumptions underlying TK and some forms of western qualitative knowledge as well.

There are issues of information transfer, but also political elements. For example, in Canada land claim agreements have made communities part of the environmental assessment process of development, but communities become overwhelmed by the bureaucracy and sheer volume. The question is whether the focus should be developing community capacity to deal with this, or changing the system? In Greenland the situation is similar, communities are overwhelmed by tourism now that the Ilulissat glacier is a World Heritage Site. While it may be interesting to get fishermen who take their boats out to sea every day to measure salinity, etc, a commercial fisherman will ask, what benefit is there for me? At what point does research become more important than the immediate on-the-ground benefits to the community? The issue of time comes in here; for example, a student could go on the boat to work for the fisherman, which would also develop trust. There is a problem of continuity, which again comes back to funding issues. It may come down to choice of focus: small universities have less pressure to produce and publish, and therefore have more time to develop relationships with communities. They could pair up with others from larger institutions (that may have less time but more funding) for collaboration. Overall, it seems the policies of southern nations, or southern centres of Arctic nations, are not keeping pace with the changing geography of the North.

This interlinks with the question of knowledge and education about the North. A clear way of reducing the North-South disconnection is through education, and the lack of geographical awareness is a problem. The North is forgotten and not understood in southern parts of North America – it is not on weather maps, and is seen as marginalized and exotic. Also in France there is a general ignorance of Arctic issues. In Denmark, students studied Native Americans rather than Greenlandic indigenous people. How do we change education, and how long will it take for people to get the new information?

We spoke of Universities in the north, and how developing these can help. In Iceland when hydroelectric power was first introduced, no engineers locally could do it. Now, 30 years later, there are. Iceland has been able to do this by traveling away, learning, then returning. More education abroad is a condition of Greenlandic independence. In Canada, northerners leave but do not return; this is a problem in Russia too. What does Iceland do to attract young people back? It seems a strong, proud identity, a strong link to a clear idea of who Icelandic people are, is key. Other ideas to combat the “brain drain” include providing financial incentives, guaranteed salary, and low interest rates.

There is increased world attention on the North, but not necessarily increased understanding. An increased understanding that there are roads and many modern things in the North must be balanced with indigenous people asserting their political rights and cultural identity. The Arctic is an intermediary when it comes to climate change for most of the world, but the focus is on problems such as climate change, charismatic megafauna (polar bears and whales) or human problems, rather than on the positives. The question of whether the International Polar Year (IPY) has helped in these issues was posed. On one hand, it can be seen by communities as a greater strain on the community: now not just a few scientists, but big TEAMS of scientists! Media misperceptions do not help this (for example, that 10,000 scientists were to be involved in IPY was translated to 10,000 researchers expected in Iqualuit by one local newspaper). IPY was meant to get the world’s attention to polar issues, and this has been very successful in Canada (although, media coverage is more related to sovereignty and political issues than IPY, but it has increased the number of published articles). The results differ among nations: not much specific IPY research/funding in Denmark or Iceland, but still gets media coverage, while at Harvard there remains little interest in the Arctic, although this will likely change because of oil. At the University of Alaska Fairbanks, most still don’t really know what IPY is. Besides IPY funding and projects, it didn’t really raise awareness of polar problems, but climate change did. That is why more people are aware now.