

Plenary Session IV: Leadership in the Age of Uncertainty

Saturday, September 27, 2008

Rapporteur: Heather Exner-Pirot

The panel on Leadership in the Age of Uncertainty comprised a wide variety of interesting topics, but ones which all related to an overriding theme of knowledge or knowledges, as well as leadership in adaptation.

To briefly review, Lisa Cockburn began by providing an accessible explanation of metatheory and the need to accept some uncertainty in science and in life.

Tristan Pierce looked at how adaptation is occurring *now* in the Canadian Arctic, how communities are dealing with it and what capacities and vulnerabilities they have to do so.

Dr. Mark Hamilton followed up on their presentations and focused on the need to approach problems of uncertainty on the appropriate scale, be it local, national or regional.

Rosa Rut Thorisdottir discussed visual anthropology and how film and visual images are particularly democratic forms of knowledge, and accessible not only to researchers and intellectuals, but to northern communities who may be interested in having a better record of their past, especially for sentimental values.

Susan Chatwood gave the Canadian perspective of mixing traditional and Western knowledges and local and territorial structures to improve public health in northern Canada and in the Arctic.

Finally, Drew Gerkey related his experiences working for Kamchatka and described the way that communities there have adapted their local collectivities or *obschina* to deal with particular issues.

Knowledges

One of the overriding themes was that perhaps we should reevaluate the false dichotomy we have established between traditional knowledge and modern science. All and any knowledge can be valuable, especially as communities make efforts to adapt to the uncertainties posed by climate change. We should not impose or value any differently the choices northern communities make in adapting to climate change, for example in drawing either from cultural knowledge and elders' experience, or taking advantage of modern technologies such as ATVs, GPS or boats. Communities will choose whichever solutions best fit their needs, and it is not fair to structure one as better than the other.

Along those same lines, in discussion it came up that it is difficult and un-useful to distinguish between "traditional lifestyles" and "modern lifestyles" in the contemporary north. Communities in Kamchatya for example have adopted ideas and structures from the pre-Soviet, Soviet and contemporary era, and will continue to adopt the most useful and relevant ideas as they respond to the challenges posed by climate change. It should be remembered that culture, too, is dynamic.

Leadership

Climate change science, in particular, has been beset by a need to achieve greater and greater certainty in identifying causes, outcomes and possible solutions. While something approaching perfect certainty will probably never be achieved, the demand for information before action takes place may be hampering real time efforts to adapt successfully to the challenges posed by climate change. All the while, communities need to – and are – adapting to climate change *now*, and cannot and will not wait for scientists and policy makers to prognosticate. Things are happening too fast. The challenge for the participants of the Northern Research Forum is to meet the challenge of uncertainty, and provide and assist leadership and adaptation in northern communities sooner and better.

The panel was a successful one, and sparked thought in the discussion groups about when and where local leadership will emerge and what can be done to facilitate it in the North.