

Breakout session

Group 2, Saturday, September 27, 2008,

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The discussion at the breakout session has generally revolved around the following four themes: *knowledge, mobility, tradition, and balance*. These themes are well aligned with the general foci of the Fifth Open Assembly and are representative of the synergetic exchange of ideas that highlighted four days of the conference.

The discussion was opened by Professor Lee Huskey who suggested looking into the population migration as an adaptation strategy to changing environmental and economic conditions in the Arctic. The *adaptation by mobility* is one of the human responses to all-pervasive changes in the region. However, migration in the Arctic is known for having substantial return rates, and population in many regions is consistent, despite hardships experienced by northerners. Whereas linkages to community may be responsible for keeping northern residents from out-migrating or encouraging them to return, the lack of educational and job opportunities at the local level stimulate the outward move.

In this light, the group discussed the shortcomings of the education system in the Arctic. The contemporary “formal” education system fails to provide adequate training and transmit knowledge relevant for the everyday life of northerners. Not surprisingly, it fails to retain students and demonstrates extremely high drop-out rates. The inadequacy of adult education programs prevents former drop-outs from returning to educational activities later in their life. At the same time, “formal” (western-styled) education is often seen by the Arctic societies as an instrument of assimilation, as it rarely involves the Indigenous knowledge. Therefore, there is a clear need for a *systemic change in education* in the North. The group discussed examples of such systemic changes in Alaska (Alaska Rural Systemic Initiative), and considered outcomes of this program, particularly in educating Indigenous women. Patricia Cochran pointed out the link between the growing number of Indigenous women receiving education and the increasing role of women in Indigenous business and government.

Further discussion unveiled a number of key components, which the group felt were crucial for achieving the desired systematic change in Arctic education. Training in mathematics and science and professional mentoring were agreed to be particularly important. On the other hand, the incorporation of Indigenous languages into the curriculum was recognized as another milestone in reforming Arctic education. Whereas Native language training is available in many regions, it was pointed out that the Native language education must be intertwined with other parts of the curricula, as well as with the local cultural and natural contexts. The group highlighted the advantages of multilingual education, and discussed links between language and culture.

Incorporating Indigenous knowledge in school curricula, as well as in scientific research, became a topic of considerable interest among the group members. Dr. Anita Nuttall posed a question concerning the limitation of the Indigenous knowledge as a source of verifiable, scientifically-acceptable information. Whereas most believed that traditional and “scientific” knowledge are complementary and should be bridged, many group members felt that the traditional knowledge in some cases has to be held accountable to academic standards. However, it was pointed out that the traditional knowledge(s) has a unique nature (in comparison to the “scientific” knowledge) and represents a dynamic system that sometimes lives as a working collection of changing stories. *Triangulation*, achievable by working with multiple sources of knowledge, was acknowledged to be the most effective strategy to ensure the high quality of research and education. In other words, the group concluded that *seeking balance* between traditional knowledge(s) and science is the best option for serving the interests of both indigenous and scientific communities. However, this balance is not devoid tensions coming from attempts by some representatives of “science” to (re)define and misuse the traditional knowledge. The latter must be protected as must be the right of the Indigenous people to define the traditional knowledge(s) for themselves.

The group concluded that the understanding of the dynamism in the North, e.g., associated with the evolution of traditional knowledge and culture, is an important factor in achieving the balance in the region.