NIAS Global Politics Brief

## **Building Ocean Governance from Below: Role of The Indigenous Communities**

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Oceans have supported biodiversity, regulation of the planet, communities and livelihood, trade, and has been a source of marine resources. Supporting a mammoth of approximately 90 percent of global trade, oceans are a lifeline for multiple sections of the society, which in turn has led to overdependence and overuse, most of which can be categorized as commercial exploitation for profits.

Sustainable Development Goal 14 spells out the need to "conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development". (Cit) An inalienable aspect of this, is to involve the indigenous coastal communities in management and governance of the oceans.

This brief makes an attempt to focus on this concept of "building from below" or a bottom-up approach in ocean management and governance. Most importantly, the essay takes the case of an indigenous Arctic community-the Inuit, who are the quintessential picture of a coastal community affected by climate change and exploitation in the High North, and are involved in voicing their concerns through necessary channels, and participating in the Arctic Ocean governance.

## **Building from below**

Ocean governance is a nascent, emergent theme. Oceans have paved way for conquests and colonialism, and the security dimension has dominated the narratives, while there is little understanding on governance. Climate change, exploitation of marine resources, pollution, increasing 'dead areas', depleting resources and the 'natural' disasters (and the impending dangers) linked to the oceans have triggered the international community to focus on the conservation, resource management, sustainable development. These changes have been witnessed by the coastal communities and time and again highlighted by the small island states on international platforms.

While there is a realization that a global challenge such as depletion of the marine ecosystem requires global responses, the indigenous coastal communities, approximately 30 million people, are not fully involved in the sustainable development discourses. The indigenous coastal communities are further vulnerable to the changes, even when their contribution to adverse effects on ocean health is negligible and lead a near-sustainable lifestyle. Marine ecosystem supports their livelihood and acts as a symbol of their culture, self-determination and identity. Fishing for instance is not only a livelihood means, but also, a means for expressing their culture and traditions. In other words, the act of fishing can be as important as their catch in the nets.

Understanding of ocean and marine environment therefore requires an inclusive approach, where the traditional knowledge of the communities is recognized and amalgamated with the 'modern' ways of conservation and management. The Aha Honua, the Coastal Indigenous Peoples' Declaration calls upon the "ocean observing community to formally recognize the traditional knowledge of Indigenous people worldwide..." and "establish meaningful partnerships with the Indigenous communities, organizations and Nations to learn and respect each other's ways of knowing..."

Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) is this understanding of 'their way of knowing'. TEK, also known as Native Science and Indigenous Knowledge, is defined by the US Fish and Wildlife Service as "the evolving knowledge acquired by indigenous and local people over hundreds or thousands of years through direct contact with the environment. This knowledge is specific to a location and includes the relationships between plants, animals, natural phenomena, landscapes and timing of events that are used for lifeways, including but not limited to hunting, fishing, trapping, agriculture, and forestry."

The definition paves way for recognizing the necessity for inclusive ocean management. First, the communities have over the years developed a relation with environment and hence marine ecosystem is tied to their socio-cultural lives. Second, their rights to resources have been recognized by the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. Third, though not in the 'modern' ways, the knowledge and practices on conservation have trickled down to generations which in turn contributes to conservation of some endangered species. Fourth, the actions implemented in consonance with the communities will prove beneficial to the larger coastal population who are not necessarily natives.

## The Case of the Inuit Community

Polar regions are experiencing climate change much more than other regions. Studies have confirmed that the Arctic experiences the global warming three times more than the rest of the globe. Accelerated melting of the sea ice in the past two decades has resulted in increased exploration of the Arctic Ocean for resources- fisheries, hydrocarbons and rare earth minerals. In 2008, the US Geological Survey highlighted that approximately 20 percent of the world's unexplored oil and gas are offshore and onshore Arctic areas. The global attention towards this led to the narratives on a 'race for the Arctic', 'a second Cold War', so on and so forth.

While the harmful economic activities, unsustainable ways of commercial resource extraction and pollution including oil spills have posed severe challenges to the Arctic's coastal indigenous communities, the production of renewable energy also has negative impacts on their livelihood. The Roan and Storheia windfarms in Norway violated the rights of the Sami reindeer herders by illegally encroaching the grazing lands, which led to the Supreme Court of Norway declaring the licenses as invalid. The Sami are primarily reindeer herders alongside being involved in fishing, whereas, the Inuit living in the northern reaches of Canada, Russia, Greenland and Alaska are a fishing and hunting community, depending on the Arctic Ocean and sea ice for food and transportation.

Sea ice that is often considered as "obstacles" by non-Arctic/non-native perspectives, particularly by the shipping companies, is an essential part of the Inuit culture and living. It emphasizes on the manner in which ocean and its features are perceived by different actors, in other words, construction of the idea of an ocean and its meaning. As Aporta (2011) writes, the Northwest Passage as a shipping lane connecting the Pacific and the Atlantic Oceans was never in the frame of thoughts of the Inuit. It is rather a European/American geographical construct that dominates the narratives on the North American or the Canadian Arctic.

For the Inuit, the sea ice is no obstacle, but an extension of land that supports their society and culture. Historically, the community has been known to build 'ice villages' with homes made from the ice that stays intact for approximately seven to eight months in the High Arctic. Archaeologists have studied and recorded the historical settlements of the Igloolik and Avvajja Inuit who resided on the shore close to the open waters, however, not much has been written about the Agiuppiniq villages which were constructed on the ice for the eight months. Any account on their settlement is mostly based on the oral history and memories, as their villages disappeared with warmer temperatures (Aporta 2011).

Since fishing and hunting are their primary occupations, the Inuit hunters move across the sea ice and reach biodiversity-rich areas such as polynyas, cracks, thin ice that are very important for their sustenance. Sea ice also holds economic, cultural and social importance to the communities. Frozen waters, floating ice acts as a bridge between the different lands that they live in, assisting them in their movement in across the ocean. The intra-community communication, movement and exchange of goods, clothing, art is completely dependent on the ocean, making their identity synonymous with the Arctic Ocean. (Eegeesiak n.d.).

Needless to mention, there has been a drastic change in how Inuit live and usage of their land, sea ice and resources. As mentioned previously climate change is showing its hard- hitting effects on a so-called remote space, the Arctic. For an Inuit member, the primary concerns that he faces, would be undoubtedly climate change, commercialization of resource extraction and fishing, tourism, shipping, pollution, and artificial borders. As numerous players show interest in the Arctic resources, this coastal indigenous community faces stiff challenges to preserve their livelihood and their way of living.

Though not comparable to the Northern Sea Route in terms of the volume of shipping, the Northwest Passage is increasingly witnessing shipping activities, political discourses where the Canadian sovereignty of the Passage is questioned by the United States which considers it to be an international passage (Steinfeld 2020). Politics is certainly not new

to the Inuit who were victims of colonialism and have been divided by 'artificial' state borders that defy their idea of a community and society. Okalik Eegeesiak, writes that the common expressions of an Inuit involve talking about "instability, unpredictability, presence of new species and open water where there should be ice" (Eegeesiak n.d.).

Being a coastal community so affected by the natural as well as anthropogenic changes, while contributing negligibly to those changes, the Inuit have involved themselves in using their indigenous knowledge for adaptation and also amalgamating traditional knowledge and modern science through various platforms and projects. Inuit knowledge, known as Inuit Quajimajatuqangit implying "that which has long been known by Inuit", is a term used to represent the Inuit history, ways of living, experience and values (Commission n.d.).

The Inuit Circumpolar Council (ICC) is one of the oldest indigenous organizations in the world and voices the concerns of Inuit living in Canada, Greenland, Alaska (US) and Chukotka (Russia). As a platform for representing the Inuit and the Inuit knowledge, the ICC is active in its international engagements, ranging from the Arctic Council to Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), and important UN bodies such as the UNEP and the UNCLOS. The ICC is the first indigenous peoples' organization to be formally granted Observer status at the IPCC in Feb 2020 (Council 2022).

The Inuit experts and researchers have come together to develop the Inuit Siku Atlas, a platform to document Inuit knowledge and the sea ice changes over a period of time, informing the same to the scientific community (I. S. Atlas n.d.). Senior Inuit members and experienced hunters have the in-depth knowledge of sea ice, its formation and melt, physiological changes, polynyas, so on and so forth. They have specific 'Inuktitut' terminologies to "describe ice conditions in different seasons, and to identify potentially dangerous conditions... necessary background and long-term observations to evaluate local changes over time" (Atlas n.d.). The project is limited to the Nunavut region of Canada and undertaken by non-government entities; however, the initiative is a classic example of inclusive ocean management and the depth of knowledge that can be provided by a community to the 'modern' scientists in understanding the Arctic Ocean.

The 'Environmental Stewardship' objective of the Kitigaaryuit Declaration of 2014 (as declared by the Inuit of Alaska, Canada, Greenland, and Chukota, on the occasion of the 12th General Assembly of the Inuit Circumpolar Council), directs "the ICC leadership to continue the effort of ICC, together with local Inuit organizations, to promote those conservation measures that support the traditional culture and lifestyle of the ecologically, economically, and historically significant areas that support the traditional culture and lifestyle of Inuit." Based on this objective of the Declaration, the ICC Canada and Greenland undertook a project for the conservation of the polynya named Pikialasorsuaq (Commission n.d.).

The Pikialasorsuaq Commission was established in 2016 to address issues with an ecosystem that has supported Inuit communities. Pikialasorsuaq is the largest Arctic polynya (area of open water surrounded by ice) and the most biologically productive areas north of the Arctic Circle. It has been recognized as a critical habitat by the Inuit-especially by the Inuit in Qikiqtani and Avanersuaq regions in Canada and Greenland.

The Commission is mandated to consult the communities living close to the polynya and recommend an Inuit strategy for safeguarding, monitoring and managing the health of the polynya for future generations (Eegeesiak n.d.).

Inuit is a community that is involved in management as well as in governance in terms of engaging with the legal set ups and authorities. However, there are inherent challenges while talking about indigenous knowledge. Climate change is a global challenge, requiring global solutions, while the indigenous knowledge is very much community specific, sub-regional specific or region-specific. The experiences, values, knowledge and memories are different for every community. As a result, the ways of managing oceans and resources are different. The primary challenge lies in managing these multiple knowledge systems and amalgamating them into the mainstream modern science.

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