

Our Baffinland: Digital Indigenous Democracy

Norman Cohn & Zacharias Kunuk

As an upsurge of development due to global warming threatens to overwhelm communities in the resource-rich Canadian Arctic, how can Inuit in those communities be *more fully involved and consulted* in their own language? What tools are needed to make knowledgeable decisions? Communicating in writing with oral cultures makes ‘consulting’ one-sided: giving people thousands of pages they can’t read is unlikely to produce an informed, meaningful response. Now for the first time Internet audiovisual tools enable community-based decision-making in oral Inuktitut that meets higher standards of constitutional and international law, and offers a new model for development in Indigenous homelands. To meet these standards, Inuit must get clear information in language they understand, talk about it together in their own way, and make consensus decisions following the concept of *angiqatigingniq*, a complex set of social, listening, and diplomatic skills for respecting differing opinions patiently until finding one unified decision everyone can support. In complex multi-lateral high-stakes negotiations, Inuit consensus—*deciding together*—may be the strongest power communities can bring to the table in situations where governments and transnational corporations are working together.

Digital Indigenous Democracy (DID) is a network of Isuma Distribution International Inc., with Nunavut Independent Television Network (NITV), Municipality of Igloodik, Nunavut Department of Culture, Language, Elders and Youth, Carleton Centre for Community Innovation, Mount Allison University and LKL International. DID is led by Zacharias Kunuk and Norman Cohn of Isuma Distribution and NITV, and Human Rights Assessor, Lloyd Lipsett. DID uses local radio, television, multimedia and social networking tools to insure meaningful community participation in oral Inuktitut in public hearings and in environmental impact and benefits decisions affecting Inuit for generations to come.

Adequate Consultation

DID pilots this model at a moment of extreme ur-

gency for Baffin Island Inuit facing one of the largest mining developments in Canadian history. Baffinland Iron Mines Corporation’s (BIM) Mary River project is a \$6 billion open-pit extraction of extremely high-grade iron ore that, if fully exploited, could continue for 100 years. The mining site, in the centre of North Baffin Island about half-way between the Inuit communities of Pond Inlet and Igloodik, requires a 150 km railroad built across frozen tundra to transport ore to a deep-water port where the world’s largest supertankers will carry it to European and Asian markets. Operating the past several years under a temporary exploratory permit, BIM filed its *Final Environmental Impact Statement* (FEIS) with the Nunavut Impact Review Board (NIRB) in February 2012. Under considerable pressure from BIM and the Government of Canada to expedite a “timely review”, NIRB has scheduled public hearings on the FEIS to begin in July 2012 in Iqaluit, Igloodik, and Pond Inlet, with a final decision on the Project in 2013.

So far, following twentieth century rules of consultation and review, discussion of BIM’s operating plan, shared revenues, and environmental or social impacts on Inuit has mostly gone on between NIRB and BIM (BIM is 70% foreign-owned by ArcelorMittal, the world’s largest steelmaker) and with BIM’s local partners. That is, the governments of Canada and Nunavut, and the agencies representing the *Nunavut Land Claims Agreement* (NLCA), Nunavut Tunngavik Inc. (NTI), and its Baffin regional arm, Qikiqtani Inuit Association (QIA). Confidential negotiations define what royalty relationships and business opportunities will be once the project is approved, with the result that BIM’s partners, representing Inuit interests, may be financially implicated in the development of the project.

Hamlet Councils and Inuit in the seven most impacted communities—Igloodik, Pond Inlet, Arctic Bay, Hall Beach, Clyde River, Kimmirut, and Cape Dorset—have not been adequately informed, consulted or included in the decision or deal-making. QIA, with financial assistance from BIM, established a 42-member Baffinland Committee of six Inuit in each of the seven communities representing different

local organizations, such as Hamlet Council, Hunters and Trappers Organization. Local Baffinland Committee-members, many of whom are unilingual in Inuktitut, meet to discuss original English-language documents received from BIM, NIRB, and QIA, with the aid of written Inuktitut ‘summaries’ prepared by QIA that most Inuit cannot read.

While some local Committee-members may believe they should pass information on to their communities, and gather comments to feedback to QIA and BIM, the Committees have not been provided with a clear mandate to do this, nor any financial or communication tools to carry it out. Despite these limitations, local Committee meeting minutes show members concerned about many aspects of Baffinland’s plan, but especially about BIM’s unilateral decision to build the deep-water port at Steensby Inlet and ship iron ore by supertankers daily through the Foxe Basin.

Inuit Qaujimagatuqangit, Foxe Basin and Steensby Inlet

Inuit Oral History and modern scientific evidence both agree: people from the region of North Baffin Island have been living and hunting walrus in Foxe Basin, and caribou in Steensby Inlet, for 4000 years. Foxe Basin known to Inuit as *Ikiq*, is the home and calving ground of Canada’s largest walrus herd, a rich ecosystem of marine mammals like seals, bowhead whales and polar bears, and nesting grounds for bird species including gyrfalcons, king eider ducks, snowy owls, snow geese, and swans. Steensby Inlet, known to Inuit as *Kangiqlukjuaq*, on the south-west coast of North Baffin Island, is the Inuit ‘Timbuktoo’ or ‘Macchu Piccu’ of the region, a major meeting crossroads on the nomadic roadmap Inuit caribou hunters followed every year for 40 centuries.

This summer Zacharias Kunuk, Cannes award-winning filmmaker, Igloolik Hamlet Councilor and Officer of the Order of Canada, will hunt walrus and caribou in the same places and same ways as his father, grandfather and their grandfathers before them since Moses led the Israelites out of Egypt or Agamemnon led the Greeks to sack Troy. Born in 1957 in a sod house at Kapuivik between *Ikiq* and *Kangiqlukjuaq*, Zacharias—who never saw a white man until he was nine years-old and now uses Facebook to interact with friends from Igloolik to Tokyo—is only one generation removed from the same Inuit who were contemporaries of *The Old Testament* and *The Iliad*. In the mysterious reality of today’s quantum Space-Time, what does this really mean? Is it possible to imagine people that old, whose knowledge and experience we would revere that much, walking the earth in the 21st Century? And in

that case, with information technologies available today, what could they tell us? What can we learn from them? How should we listen?

The ancient skill of consensus decision-making, named *angiqatigingniq* [ahng-yee-kha-te-GING-nik] in the Six ‘Commandments’ of traditional Inuit knowledge called *Inuit Qaujimagatuqangit* or IQ, enabled small groups of people to survive and thrive for 4000 years in the world’s harshest climate. Inuit learned the hard way, through experience, that the safest way to go forward in a dangerous environment is by patiently listening to, and respecting, different opinions until one unified decision emerges that everyone can support. The other five IQ commandments sound equally modern in today’s film, video and social networking twenty-first century: acquiring knowledge, adapting resourcefully, working together, putting community above the individual and, most timely, what Inuit call *Avatimik Kamattiarniq*, a concept of environmental stewardship stressing the relationship between Inuit (i.e. people) and their environment.

Linking Digital Indigenous Democracy and Human Rights Impact Assessment

Recent trends in international law now recognize that business enterprises have a responsibility to respect human rights throughout their operations. *Human Rights Impact Assessments* (HRIA) identify potential positive and negative impacts of a business enterprise through consultation and dialogue with all stakeholders. *Free, Prior and Informed Consent* (FPIC) highlights the fundamental importance of consultation and good faith negotiation with Indigenous peoples about projects that affect their land, resources, and cultural heritage. The *Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative* (EITI) is an important standard to promote financial transparency and ensure that communities benefit from the significant revenues generated by resource extraction. Together, these standards focus on informed consultation, participation and transparency as necessary protection of Indigenous lands.

Both the Environmental Review by Nunavut Impact Review Board (NIRB) and an Inuit Impact and Benefits Agreement (IIBA) negotiated by Qikiqtani Inuit Association (QIA) require Inuit to be *informed and consulted* under terms defined by the Nunavut Land Claims Agreement (NLCA), the Canada’s Supreme Court of Canada and the Indigenous peoples rights standards in Canadian and international law. Canada formally supports all these standards; however, across long-standing language and cultural barriers, none is easy to carry out. Through DID, Inuit adapt ‘*deciding together*’ to the challenges of mod-

ern transnational development—to get information they need in language they understand, to talk about their concerns publicly, and to reach collective decisions with the power of consensus. Starting in May 2012, DID media tools inform, consult, and assist Inuit to make decisions together in the seven impacted Inuit communities, while at the same time LKL International carries out a Human Rights Impact Assessment looking at the positive and negative impacts of the proposed mine in terms of international human rights standards and best practices. Inuit consensus is presented publicly online through

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IsumaTV (www.isuma.tv/DID), through local radio and television channels in all Nunavut communities and submitted formally to the regulatory process through the multimedia HRIA.

Digital Indigenous Democracy is not ‘anti-mining,’ it is ‘pro-law.’ By 2012, both Canadian constitutional law and international law consistently define the “moral and constitutional obligation to consult” (Hon. Joe Oliver, Minister of Natural Resources) as a legal obligation by governments and transnational corporations seeking to develop projects on Indigenous lands. These rights are further reinforced by the NLCA which requires ‘public participation’ and ‘consultation’ of ‘Inuit’ (that is, ‘people,’ rather than only ‘Designated Inuit Organizations’). Inuit—people—must be consulted *meaningfully*, after having been *adequately* informed in language they can understand, before the legal standards of a review process can be met. In contrast, consulting people *meaninglessly* on something about which they have not been adequately informed is unlikely to survive a future judicial review DID’s role in informing Inuit adequately, so they can be consulted meaningfully, is designed simply to bring the Baffinland review process into legal compliance with Canadian and global standards today.

NIRB begins public hearings on BIM’s *Final Environmental Impact Statement (FEIS)* on July 16, 2012 in Iqaluit, Igloodik and Pond Inlet, leading toward a recommendation to Canada’s Minister of Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development as early as September 2012, with a final decision by the Minister on the project soon after. In this frame of urgency, DID’s multimedia experiment together with the HRIA

allow Inuit to participate *meaningfully* in public hearings and decision-making during the year ahead, bringing what appear to be ‘nostalgic’ Inuit values onto the main stage of twenty-first century events, affecting not only Inuit but the interconnected planet we all occupy. We call this experiment *Deciding Together: Angiqatigingniq Internet Network (AIN)*, a gift from the past to the future.

Deciding Together: Angiqatigingniq Internet Network (AIN)
DID launches Angiqatigingniq Internet Network (AIN) in four Inuktitut-language media activities that

improve community radio, local-channel television, professional filmmaking, and high-speed interactive Internet across the region of low-band-

width communities. Each activity gives Inuit tools to gain knowledge and talk together, locally and regionally, about the Baffinland proposal, NIRB review, Inuit Impact and Benefits Agreement (IIBA), and ongoing deal-making among BIM, QIA, and the governments of Canada and Nunavut; and to adapt the process of *angiqatigingniq* to find decisions together on current issues most important to them. Deciding together, as a consensus-building process, gives Inuit communities much greater power and influence at the negotiating table. Using DID media tools, Inuit can communicate these decisions and how they made them, publicly and audio-visually, in Inuktitut and in translated versions that all Canadians can understand. ☉

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Glossary

1. *Nipivut Nunatinnii (Our Voice at Home):* Community radio online.
2. *Inuktiturmiut (Our Own Language):* Local TV channels connected by Internet.
3. *Angiqatigingniq (Deciding Together):* Multimedia social network and Human Rights.
4. *Qikiqtani Nunatinnii (Our Baffinland):* Film, television, digital mapping, global Internet.

For more detailed information about these activities, please stay tuned to www.isuma.tv/DID.