

Food security and mining in Nunatsiavut

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Often resource development and food security are treated as isolated phenomena by university-based researchers. The pitfall of this approach is that the interactions between the two are overlooked and people's experiences are fragmented and oversimplified. On July 21-22, 2015, 16 Inuit women living in the coastal communities of Nain, Hopedale, Makkovik, Rigolet, and Postville gathered to participate in focus group discussions about the impacts of nearby Voisey's Bay mine a decade after its opening in 2005. The discussion focused on how Nunatsiavut had changed, and what they wanted to see for the future. The scope of the focus group included changing gender relations and community wellbeing, what could be improved and what future economic development should look like. Women were quick to draw connections between mine development and food security, or the absence of adequate food. This was the topic that women spoke most passionately about over the two days, and was the area where they felt the most urgent change was needed.

Women connected mining and food security in two ways. First, the mine was causing increased economic inequality in the community and this was creating greater discrepancies in access to food. Second, people felt that they were sold a bill of goods when they chose to support the development of the Voisey's Bay mine — a bill of goods that did not materialize. They believed that the mine should be helping to alleviate poverty; given that they had allowed mining development on their territory, they felt that people should not be going hungry. Participants highlighted the injustice that the mine was making a lot of money off of their land and people still couldn't get enough food to eat.

This summary of key themes related to food security discussed in the focus group is followed by a series of personal reflections by workshop coordinator Johanna Tuglavina.

Mining wealth, inequality and food insecurity

Employment opportunities resulting from the development of Voisey's Bay were one of the most visible ways that participants saw the mine changing the community. One participant said that the mine resulted in

“more money in the community and less people on income support.” Several women described how the flow of wealth into their communities also resulted in an increase in consumer goods such as “more buildings, homes, and boats,” and “more variety of foods in the stores...” Respondents were quick to note, however, that these benefits were primarily experienced by people who were working at the mine or who had relatives or spouses at the mine. And although some individuals were benefiting from opportunities at the mine, they also felt that wealth generated by Voisey's Bay was not helping to alleviate poverty experienced by many residents of Nunatsiavut. Many participants contrasted the increased access to jobs and wealth experienced by some with the continuing poverty experienced by others.

Several participants recounted different examples of people who they felt were qualified for jobs but were unable to get a job at the mine or who were laid off and not re-hired. Participants linked continuing poverty in Nain and other coastal communities to what they viewed to be limited access to employment at Voisey's Bay. Participants expressed general frustration that many in their communities continued to struggle despite the massive profits being made by the mine. One participant expressed this clearly when she said: “Look at the millions of dollars that is hauled out by each boatload, and look at the poverty that's still here.” Participants also highlighted rising economic inequality in their communities. Those not employed at Voisey's Bay feel that they are being left behind:

“I think a lot of people are struggling though. I know I'm struggling ... We can't afford to buy a lot of things now ... it's like having internet, if you don't have it then you're left out of the communication, when you've got it you're contacting the whole world.”

A concrete example of this inequality recounted by many was how rising food prices were exacerbating already existing inequalities in access to food. As stated by one woman, “I can see how the lower income families could have it even harder, with the prices increasing because of Voisey's Bay in stores



Focus group discussion about the impacts of Voisey's Bay mine. Left to right: Clara Winters, Katie Haye, Fran Williams and Louisa Lampe.

for food and groceries.” Some participants also described the psychological impact of this rising inequality, stating that it “lowered self-worth because some people cannot afford high-priced products and services.” The concept of relative poverty, poverty measured as one’s ability to maintain the average standard of living within the community, is therefore important in the case of mining development since it can increase as average income levels increase while the incomes of some remain stagnant.

Another participant also used the issue of food prices to illustrate her concerns about lowering levels of self-esteem from increasing relative poverty.

“The prices are so high that accessibility to healthier food items remains a concern. It’s one thing to have these made available, but it’s a whole [other] thing if people do not have access to it, simply because it’s unaffordable to most local people in town. Imagine what that can do to someone on low income, who for the most part is buying the basics of food, flour, sugar, carnation milk, canned goods and then standing next to someone else who is purchasing all these wonderful healthy ingredients, healthy vegetables and fruit.”

Some participants felt that rising inequality among individuals and families was also creating divisions in the community. In particular, those with jobs had access to large quantities of quality food at the mine – and had greater ability to buy foods in town while others went hungry or were unable to afford healthy food. This created tension and resentment. The local grocery store also began to get a wider variety of food, much of which was unaffordable for many people.

Mining injustice

Before the mine was built, people in the communities surrounding Voisey’s Bay were told that the mine would help alleviate poverty – but it has not. Focus group participants highlighted the injustice

that the mine was making a lot of money off of their land and people still couldn’t get enough food to eat.

“They have this boat that comes in the spring to pick up the nickel and copper and stuff, and when the first boat comes in to Labrador there’s no food on there. The first boat should be bringing in [food stuffs] and things like that, not a construction thing or nickel thing up there.”

Other women expressed similar sentiments stating: “Look at the millions of dollars that is hauled out by each boatload, and look at the poverty that’s still here,” and, “a lot of people feel the benefits don’t come from [natural resource development]”. These perceptions shaped women’s views about future resource development. Women were not opposed to development; however, they felt that greater benefits from development needed to flow to communities.

Time on the land

Participants felt that working at Voisey’s Bay influenced the amount of time that families spent out on the land hunting, fishing, and harvesting. However, there were differing views on how time on the land had changed. Several participants felt that working at Voisey’s Bay allowed women from Voisey’s Bay families to spend more time on the land since it provided cash needed to participate in harvesting. Others, however, felt that women were experiencing a “loss of interest in hunting and fishing,” and that both men and women were spending less time on the land. One participant attributed this to the increased time constraints faced by workers:

“[Workers] thought they’d have more opportunity to go on the land, because they had more money for gas, they had more money to buy a reliable machine and stuff like that, but I don’t think that’s really the case. You would have to make it a priority to go and do that ... Generally everybody in Rigolet is going out less, to be honest with you.”



Focus group discussion about the impacts of Voisey's Bay mine. Left to right: Johanna Tuglavina, Charlotte Wolfrey and Given Tuglavina.

Rather than having a universally positive or negative effect, there were both costs and benefits to gaining employment at the mine. This was noted by one participant who stated: "It's a choice you have to make on your own. If you want that money, that kind of security, or if you want your happiness and family. So it's your personal choice." Although employment at the mine brings an improved income, it also has the potential to reduce time with family and on the land.

Food security for the future

Focus group participants were of the view that there are not enough options for healthy and affordable food in town. To address this concern participants argued that royalties could be used to help set up community greenhouses "so that people could grow their own vegetables instead of buying the expensive vegetables from outside." Other suggestions included a community staff person dedicated to helping people in need during a crisis, as well as supports for subsistence harvesting on the land.

"We need to support more harvesting too, if people want to go off the land, there should be little programs that can help people do that. We got the skills to survive or the transportation means. We need to help with that."

Conclusion

According to a recent Statistics Canada report based on data from the 2012 Aboriginal People's Survey, 42% of adult Inuit in Nunatsiavut reported that they had experienced food insecurity in the previous 12 months, a somewhat lower percentage than the 55% reported in Inuit Nunangat (the Inuit Regions of Canada). Women had a nearly 10% higher probability of living in a food insecure household. Other indicators of food insecurity noted included having children, unemployment, living in a crowded household, and having weak family ties. Unsurprisingly,

Inuit adults experiencing food insecurity were less likely to self-report as being healthy, and were more likely to report at least one chronic health condition.¹

These stark statistics in the region of one of Canada's richest base metal deposits are brought to life by the experiences of the women who participated in the 2015 focus group. Not only did the women offer important insights into the relationship between mine development and widening disparities in food security – they also provided ideas about how this critical issue could be addressed, including a vision for a robust mixed economy that encompasses social and traditional components. One important learning from the focus group is that Nunatsiavut women are not just victims of food insecurity – they are an important part of the solution. Organizations like AnânauKatiget Tumingit Regional Inuit Women's Association and local women's self-organizing initiatives should be starting points for developing strategies and programs to build food-secure communities in the area surrounding Voisey's Bay mine. ●

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Endnotes

¹ Paula Arriagada (February 2017). *Food insecurity among Inuit living in Inuit Nunangat*. Ottawa: Statistics Canada.