



## **Context**

Today's elders were between 20 and 45 years old when the *James Bay and Northern Québec Agreement* was signed in 1975. The majority lived essentially from traditional harvesting and knew how to survive in the harsh Arctic environment. At that time, the communities lacked all but the most rudimentary services. None of the infrastructure that we take for granted now, such as airstrips, marine infrastructure, grocery stores, arenas and so on, were available. There were no telephones, no television and no Internet.

Elders have had to adapt to the modern world. From an economy based on the trade of seal skins and animal pelts, they learned to become seasonal workers and provide essentials to their families. Elders' capacity to play a role in our communities has however been greatly diminished because of their lack of knowledge of French and English and of formal schooling, pre-requisites for most jobs, business opportunities and government dealings. The traditional knowledge of elders, though often referred to as instrumental in planning and decision-making, is more often than not ignored. Their contribution to society is forgotten.

## **A Few of the Challenges**

While elders did everything to adapt to the modern world, very little has been done to adapt government programs and services to their needs or to address their deteriorating living conditions.

The *Socio-Economic Profile of Elders in Nunavik* (2005) identifies many differences between the living conditions of elders in Nunavik and seniors elsewhere in Québec:

- 70% of elders practice hunting or fishing and 89% of them share a portion of their catch with individuals outside their household.
- 12% of elders declare that they regularly or often experience a shortage of food.
- 87% of the elders are unilingual Inuktitut speakers and 86% never completed primary school.
- The annual average income of elders is \$19,250 (13% less than in other parts of Québec, \$22,300). This average income is too low considering the high cost of essential goods and of hunting and fishing equipment and supplies.
- 83% of elder households include an average of 3.2 dependent children, grandchildren or great grandchildren.

Many elders must spend extended periods of time away from their communities for health reasons.

In 2008, life expectancy in Nunavik was 70.7 years for men (8.1 years less than elsewhere in Québec) and 74.5 years for women (8.9 years less than elsewhere in Québec). Elders are also concerned with the high death rate recorded among youth, due to suicide and accidents.

## **Solutions and Priorities**

In the context of the 2007 Québec Public Consultation on Seniors' Living Conditions, elders expressed their priorities as follows:

- Adequate adapted housing.
- Assistance to deal with taxation issues (reporting, responding to government correspondence and outstanding taxes and late fees) and with government documentation in French.
- Developing solutions to prevent alcohol and drug abuse by some family members, as well as to stop the increasing violence in families and communities.
- Food security.
- Improved income and pensions that correspond to the high cost of living.
- Adequate hunting and fishing equipment.

Solutions proposed for some of the above priorities include:

- Establish five-year agreements covering the construction of intergenerational housing units.
- Service Québec and Revenu Québec services delivered in Inuktitut.
- Create a mechanism to help elders resolve outstanding taxes and late fees with Revenu Québec.
- Set up community care centres that distribute essential provisions, funded by revenue from mining activities.
- Establish an adequate northern pension that takes into account the high cost of living.
- Set up mechanisms to shield children from family violence and help families to get help for this problem.

## **Discussion**

In 2012, there were only 716 elders living in the region. Funding to improve their living conditions should be easy to identify. Notwithstanding, the seniors programs delivered by governments do not address the priorities of Nunavik elders. What can be done to convince governments to take action? And what support can Nunavimmiut bring?

