

The Arctic and Northern Policy Framework: A shared vision of strong, self-reliant people and communities

On September 10, 2019, Minister of Crown-Indigenous Relations Carolyn Bennett released the long awaited [Arctic and Northern Policy Framework](#) (the Framework), a shared vision of “strong, self-reliant people and communities working together for a vibrant, prosperous and sustainable Arctic and northern region at home and abroad, while expressing Canada's enduring Arctic sovereignty.”

The Framework is meant to “better align Canada’s national and international policy objectives with priorities of Indigenous peoples and Arctic and northern residents” and being described as a strategic vision to guide Canada’s activities and investments in the North and Arctic until 2030.

How does it measure up?

While the Framework claims to establish “clear priorities and potential actions”, it is drafted aspirationally, with no measurable commitments. The Framework does not provide a timeline or funding guidelines nor does it provide an implementation plan.

That said, it does provide a long-overdue overhaul of the aging Canada's Northern Strategy (2009) and the Statement on Canada's Arctic Foreign Policy (2010), and reflects input and priorities put forward from among federal government departments, 3 provincial governments (Newfoundland and Labrador, Quebec, and Manitoba) and all 3 territorial governments (Yukon, Northwest Territories, Nunavut) together with 25 Indigenous organizations representing First Nations, Inuit, and Métis from across the North. Even though there was no consensus on the outcomes, there was sustained engagement between public and Indigenous governments on all the issues, as well as regional roundtable discussions held in northern and Arctic communities; interest-based roundtables; and a public submissions process.

What does it cover?

The Framework set out 8 goals, with accompanying objectives, and 10 principles. The goals are as follows:

- 1) Canadian Arctic and northern Indigenous peoples are resilient and healthy
- 2) Strengthened infrastructure that closes gaps with other regions of Canada
- 3) Strong, sustainable, diversified and inclusive local and regional economies
- 4) Knowledge and understanding guides decision-making
- 5) Canadian Arctic and northern ecosystems are healthy and resilient
- 6) The rules-based international order in the Arctic responds effectively to new challenges and opportunities
- 7) The Canadian Arctic and North and its people are safe, secure and well-defended
- 8) Reconciliation supports self-determination and nurtures mutually respectful relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples

Why should Indigenous Governments and Organizations Care?

Indigenous governments currently engaged in land claim and self-government negotiations can look to the goals and principles supporting the settlement of lands claims and self-government agreements, including the implementation of finalized claims and agreements.

In particular, goal 8 acknowledges that “reconciliation supports self-determination” and “nurtures mutually respectful relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples”. These are important admissions if true reconciliation is to occur. The remaining goals broadly support the inclusion of Indigenous governments and organizations in developing “strong, sustainable, diversified, and inclusive local and regional economies”; “Knowledge and understanding guiding decision-making” and “healthy resilient ecosystems”. Many of the goals reference local Indigenous knowledge and the critical importance of locally-led research, including the involvement of Indigenous Guardians.

Supporting the goals are the following Framework principles, which are intended to guide the implementation stage of the Framework:

- 1) Decisions about the Arctic and the North will be made in partnership with and with the participation of northerners, to reflect the rights, needs and perspectives of northerners
- 2) The rights and jurisdictions of Canada's federal, territorial, provincial, Indigenous and municipal governments will be respected
- 3) Development should be sustainable and holistic, integrating social, cultural, economic and environmental considerations
- 4) Ongoing reconciliation with Indigenous peoples, using the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission as a starting point, is foundational to success
- 5) As climate change is a lived reality in the region, initiatives will take into account its various impacts, including its impact on Indigenous northerners, who continue to rely on the land and wildlife for their culture, traditional economy, and food security
- 6) Policy and programming will reflect a commitment to diversity and equality, and to the employment of analytical tools such as Gender-Based Analysis Plus to assess potential impacts on diverse groups of people
- 7) The framework will respect a distinctions-based approach to ensure that the unique rights, interests and circumstances of Inuit, Arctic and northern First Nations and Métis are acknowledged, affirmed and implemented
- 8) The Government of Canada recognizes Inuit, First Nations, and Métis as the Indigenous peoples of Canada, consisting of distinct, rights-bearing communities with their own histories, including with the Crown
- 9) The work of forming renewed relationships based on the recognition of rights, respect, co-operation and partnership must reflect the unique interests, priorities and circumstances of each people
- 10) Every sector of society, from the private sector to universities and colleges, the not-for-profit sector, community-based organizations and individual Canadians, has an important part to play in building a strong Canadian Arctic and North.

Notably, these principles support the inclusion of Indigenous governments and organizations in governance decisions and meaningful government-to-government partnerships; in economic development; and in policy and programming. Decisions are to be made in partnership with all Northerners; rights and jurisdictions are to be respected; and development is to be sustainable and holistic. The Framework principles further recognize that Indigenous northerners are unique

and distinct with respective rights, interests and circumstances that must be acknowledged, affirmed and implemented, and that Indigenous governments and organizations represent rights-bearing communities with their own histories reflecting their unique interests, priorities and circumstances.

The Northwest Territories Chapter of the Framework

Provincial, territorial and Indigenous partners developed chapters to the Framework. [The NWT Chapter](#), contributed by the Government of the Northwest Territories (“GNWT”) is intended to be a foundation for future discussions as the Framework enters the next stage of co-development.

The NWT Chapter is notable mostly for the close focus on the Northwest Territories’ economic challenges, and notes that the NWT is expected to face economic stagnation attributable to the lack of access to resources; the high cost of energy and transportation; the high cost of living; Government of Canada policy decisions related to oil and gas development; and the forecasted decline in diamond mine production. Noting that the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of the NWT has declined 13 percent since 2017, the GNWT contributions to the Framework strongly support the inclusion of the Indigenous governments and organizations in mining and other economic development projects.

The NWT Chapter lays out 5 main priorities for action, with the first two priorities focused on the economy and infrastructure. People; environment; and governance and reconciliation with Indigenous peoples round out the list, but the focus of the latter issues is largely economic, emphasising the need for new investments as well as cost-cutting to ensure that programs and services remain affordable.

Each of the GNWT’s priorities is further described with commentary below:

Economy

The Framework claims that the “GNWT recognizes and supports modern land claim settlements and self-government agreements, and is beginning to explore ways to work together to enhance economic development and start to revitalize the economy”. Specifically, the GNWT sets out the following aspirations:

- transforming Aurora College into a polytechnic university must now be implemented and the development of the knowledge economy is intrinsic to this plan
- funding support for the development of Indigenous postsecondary educational programs and institutions which would in turn support the growth of traditional Indigenous economic activities and promote economic reconciliation in the North
- sector-specific training and development plans, such as in the aviation industry
- directed skills training and access to higher education for residents to ready themselves to work in an invigorated economy. The Framework notes that efforts should be made to attract skilled workers to relocate to the NWT to address significant economic leakage from NWT resource projects to southern jurisdictions, noting that in 2017, the North lost \$500 million in labour income earned by non-residents.

Infrastructure

The GNWT cites infrastructure constraints in the NWT, including the lack of all-weather transportation into communities; lack of clean energy alternatives to the diesel power which most communities currently rely on; and lack of efficient digital communication infrastructure as key reasons for the current economic challenges. The Framework proposes that partnerships with Indigenous governments and organizations in the development of infrastructure projects will bring economic benefits to the Indigenous people and in the long term benefit the north as a whole.

The GNWT's priority infrastructure projects are also identified in the Framework:

- 1) Taltson Hydro Expansion Project
- 2) continued expansion of the Mackenzie Valley Highway
- 3) creation of an access corridor to the Slave Geological Province

The GNWT claims that these three projects are keys to lowering the cost of living and meeting Canada's commitments to a lower-carbon economy, which in turn would potentially unlock the NWT's full economic potential. Further, the GNWT claims that community and housing infrastructure would benefit from large scale development projects, as new revenues can be used towards housing.

In our experience, large hydro projects like the Taltson Hydro Expansion Project rarely deliver the promised benefits to local communities, and suffer from cost over-runs, delays and other issues that are easily predicted but hard to avoid. Recent examples in BC (Site C) and Newfoundland and Labrador (Muskrat Falls) are cases in point. We recommend that Indigenous Governments call for a full cost-benefit analysis of the proposal to be done independently of the GNWT before public funds that can be used to meet other priorities are dedicated to a risky major development. Similar concerns can be raised about investments in the proposed Slave Geological Province access corridor, particularly when there are numerous communities in the Northwest Territories who would directly benefit from the completion of the Mackenzie Valley Highway as a first priority.

People

The GNWT acknowledges that "Indigenous cultures, languages and traditions are the foundation of our communities". Yet there are serious gaps in the outcomes on all spectrums of health and social well-being for Northerners, particularly for Indigenous Northerners. Communities outside of Yellowknife face lower educational attainment; high unemployment; poorer health and mental health; high food insecurity; and lack of accessible and affordable housing. The GNWT rightly identifies building and maintaining more affordable housing in NWT communities as a top priority.

Environment

The NWT chapter points out that continued support for Indigenous governments to participate in and lead environmental research, guardianship programs, and environmental management initiatives is necessary to reach the Framework's environmental goals. The GNWT

acknowledges that Indigenous knowledge is key to any successful environmental management initiatives or goals in the North.

Governance and Reconciliation

The GNWT acknowledges that land claims and self-government agreements need to be finalized and implemented if the NWT is to see any success in reaching the goals of the Framework.

NWT Priority Action Items in the Framework

The NWT Chapter priority actions items provide direction for actions to be taken in order to reach the NWT goals by 2030. The GNWT intends these priorities to frame the next stage of developing a timeline, implementation plan and accompanying budget, including funds to support the inclusion and involvement of Indigenous governments and organizations.

Priorities to 2030 include:

1. Infrastructure for clean energy, lowered cost of living and economic development

- Taltson Hydro expansion
- Mackenzie Valley Highway
- Slave Geological Province transportation and energy corridor
- Expanded fibre link and broadband service
- Increased investment in social housing stock and affordable housing
- Improved marine, airports and critical community infrastructure for greater safety and security of Northerners and northern eco-system
- Modern treaty area specific priority infrastructure investments

2. Growing a diversified and sustainable economy

- Incentives to promote exploration and development and inter-governmental collaboration on regional mineral development policies and strategies
- Canada's approach to reclamation and remediation of development sites supports the growth of Indigenous and northern businesses
- Canada's agricultural policies and food safety regulations are inclusive of the needs of NWT producers and harvesters, especially for access to markets outside the NWT
- Increased initiatives to foster an NWT manufacturing sector, for entrepreneurship and small businesses, and tourism growth in Indigenous communities
- Strategic investments to support growth of a knowledge economy, including a geospatial centre of expertise in Inuvik, and research and innovation in cold climate technologies
- Canada's labour, immigration and tax policies and programs contribute to an increasingly skilled labour pool resident in the NWT, and the retention of wealth within the territory

3. Healthy people and communities

- Increase access to early childhood care and education in all communities
- Increase educational attainment levels

- Increase knowledge and use of Indigenous languages and traditional ways of life - including through on the land learning – for all ages
- Increase access to and delivery of healing, health, mental health, addictions recovery, and child and family supports that are culturally relevant and include a focus on prevention
- More investments in health and social science research to meet community needs, including improved sharing of data
- Increase access to distance learning for small and remote communities, particularly for high school and post-secondary education
- Increase accessibility to advanced skills training for jobs and to higher education through the creation of a polytechnic university in the NWT
- Increase access to long term and continuing care services for Elders by supporting the construction of long term care facilities as a collaborative venture between governments and Indigenous partners

4. Food security for health, lower costs and new opportunities

- Increased subsidies for individual or community gardens
- Increased funding in support of local traditional harvesting
- Increased quotas for domestic supply of NWT food products
- Address regulatory barriers to domestic market of NWT food products
- Address regulatory barriers to using and accessing traditional foods commercially
- Implement the Great Slave Lake Fishery strategy
- Increased agricultural research on cold weather climate food production and storage
- More education and training in communities on nutrition, food production and traditional harvesting and preservation of food

5. Environment: Responsibly stewarding the land and resources now and for future generations

- Significant increases in funding of research, monitoring and mitigation of climate change impacts, particularly focussed on threats to major infrastructure and communities as well as impacts on species, species at risk, and disasters such as forest fire and drought
- Recognize the leadership of Indigenous peoples and support capacity-building in both traditional knowledge and scientific research, and environmental monitoring and guardianship
- Improve management and sharing of information on key environmental and species data
- Complete land use plans for every region of the territory
- Major advances in remediation/mediation of reclamation sites and community waste and water infrastructure

6. Governance and reconciliation

- Completion of outstanding land claims and self-government agreements
- Implementation of existing agreements including appropriate levels of funding for modern treaty agreements including self-government
- Fulfillment of commitments made in the Devolution Agreement of 2014 for review of the Mackenzie Valley Resource Act provisions and a co-management agreement for oil and gas resources in the Beaufort Sea

- Lifting of the Beaufort Sea Moratorium so that residents can benefit from responsible and sustainable development of Beaufort Sea Offshore resources
- Review and related amendments to the MVRMA completed and transfer of remaining responsibilities to the NWT
- Investments in governance capacity for Indigenous self-governments and for supportive programs to increase the number of women in leadership positions
- A stronger and more consistent role for Indigenous and northern voices in international Arctic fora

7. Safe and secure people, communities and environment

- Comprehensive and integrated emergency planning and risk mitigation for NWT communities, including search and rescue
- Implement disaster mitigation plans being developed for remote communities
- Extension of the Inuvik airport runway
- Expansion of Joint Task Force (North) and Canadian Coast Guard presence

Concluding Comments

There is no doubt that the Framework focus on the development of Northern communities and economies is well placed. Sustainable resource development, economic diversification and job creation are goals that Indigenous governments and organizations support. Where further discussion is required is on the priorities. The public governments (Canada and the GNWT) believe this can best be accomplished through investments in transportation, energy and communications infrastructure, and innovation. What remains to be seen is whether they can work collaboratively towards consensus with Indigenous governments and organizations in determining priorities so that Indigenous people are not once again left behind by developers.

To achieve its purpose, the Framework must do more than set goals and priorities. It must translate those goals into meaningful action and measurable results. Public governments must support Indigenous governments and organizations to determine their future in their own way, so that they can fully participate in these decisions about the future of the North. All governments must be accountable to Northerners for the outcomes.