

Briefing Note

Canada's Arctic and Northern Policy Framework: A roadmap for the future?

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Introduction

On 10 September 2019, Canada's Liberal government quietly released its long-awaited Arctic and Northern Policy Framework (ANPF). After four years of development, the document appeared on the Crown-Indigenous Relations and Northern Affairs website. It included no photos, maps, or even a downloadable pdf – just a wave of words, over 17,000 in the main chapter alone. The single infographic that accompanied the framework's release captured its main "highlights": that a "whole-of-government, co-development" process that created the framework involved the three territorial governments, over 25 Indigenous organizations, as well as three provincial governments.¹ This collaborative process represents the "profound change of direction" that the Government of Canada highlights in the opening sentence of the ANPF.³ Iqaluit Mayor Madeleine Redfern noted how "the framework speaks to the fact that we need to be more collaborative, more strategic. It's not a strategy per se, other than to say we need to actually be working together."²

The government's emphasis on collaborative governance recognizes that when Ottawa has defined problems facing the North incorrectly or has set the wrong priorities, with little consultation from Northerners, policy responses have been shortsighted and ineffective. While critics have lauded the process involved in co-developing the framework, they have questioned the hasty release of what seems to be a partially-developed document, coming just a day before the federal government announced Canada's 2019 federal election. The ANPF appeared with no budget, timelines, or clear plan to address the wide array of challenges and issues identified. Critics have labelled the

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framework a “half-baked” and “chaotic mess”⁴ that simply lists well-known issues and gives “lip service to addressing the problems,”⁵ while providing no “concrete” plan for action.⁶

The ANPF highlights many well-known issues that Northerners have identified for years, including climate change impacts, food insecurity, poverty, health inequalities, and housing shortages. It is useful in reinforcing common understandings of these problems with those most affected, reiterating the importance of these issues to the general Canadian public, and setting priorities for federal policy. The framework also points out that the government and its Indigenous and territorial partners have already acted on some of the challenges and opportunities identified during the long co-development process – particularly through innovative and unique community-based initiatives. The ANPF’s expressed objective, however, is to provide a “roadmap” to achieve the “shared vision” co-developed by the groups involved in the process. If this is a roadmap, it is one with few clear directions – a map that identifies hazards, problems, and opportunities, but does little to illuminate how the federal government will work practically with its partners to navigate the complex terrain around myriad Arctic policy priorities and seemingly intractable political dilemmas.

“Consultation was not enough:” Background of the ANPF

Liberal leader Justin Trudeau spent little time talking about the Arctic during the 2015 federal election campaign. His emphasis on the environment and reconciliation with Indigenous peoples, however, indicated how his government would approach northern issues. “No relationship is more important to me and to Canada than the one with Indigenous Peoples,” Trudeau highlighted in his publicly-released mandate letter to each of his Cabinet ministers in November 2015. “It is time for a renewed, nation-to-nation relationship with Indigenous Peoples, based on recognition of rights, respect, co-operation, and partnership.”⁷ In May 2016, the Government of Canada announced its unqualified support for the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), stressing that “meaningful engagement with Indigenous Peoples aims to secure their free, prior and informed consent when Canada proposes to take actions which impact them and their rights.”⁸

Trudeau’s focus on reconciliation framed the Joint Statement on Environment, Climate Change, and Arctic Leadership that he and President Obama released in March 2016. The two leaders articulated a shared vision for the Arctic that included close bilateral cooperation, working in partnership with Indigenous Peoples and Northerners, and science-based decision-making in conservation and economic development.⁹ The US-Canada Joint Arctic Leaders’ Statement issued that December prioritized “soft security” and safety issues, environmental protection and conservation, the incorporation of Indigenous science and traditional knowledge into decision-making, supporting strong communities, and building a sustainable Arctic economy. The leaders also announced a moratorium on Arctic offshore oil and gas activity. (The Liberal government failed to consult with the territorial governments or Northern Indigenous organizations about the moratorium, causing much indignation, particularly in the Northwest Territories).¹⁰

Prime Minister Trudeau also used the Joint Arctic Leaders’ Statement to announce his plan to “co-develop a new Arctic Policy Framework, with Northerners, Territorial and Provincial governments, and First Nations, Inuit, and Métis People” that would replace his Conservative predecessor Stephen Harper’s Northern Strategy. The Liberal government promised that a

collaborative approach would ensure that the views and priorities of Arctic residents and governments would be at the “forefront of policy decisions affecting the future of the Canadian Arctic and Canada’s role in the circumpolar Arctic.” Through the framework’s co-development process Ottawa promised that it would “reorganize and reprioritize federal activities in the Arctic” and “link existing federal government initiatives.”¹¹

Trudeau announced that his new framework would include an “Inuit-specific component, created in partnership with Inuit, as Inuit Nunangat [the Inuit homeland comprised of the Inuvialuit settlement region in the Northwest Territories, the entirety of Nunavut, the Nunavik region of Quebec, and the Nunatsiavut region of Newfoundland and Labrador] comprises over a third of Canada’s land mass and over half of Canada’s coast line, and as Inuit modern treaties govern the entirety of this jurisdictional space.”¹² The government’s focus on Inuit Nunangat throughout the process represented a significant departure from the approach utilized in Harper’s Northern Strategy, which did not view the Inuit homeland as a cohesive space for policymaking and tended to examine priorities and interventions through the lens of Canada’s three northern territories. The new process reflected the Trudeau government’s distinctions-based approach that “respects the unique rights, interests and circumstances of Inuit, First Nations and Métis peoples” as well as the Inuit Nunangat Declaration on Inuit-Crown Partnership – a “bilateral partnership” to act on shared priorities.¹³ The adoption of Inuit Nunangat as a central policy framework also reflects the vision articulated a half-century ago by Inuit leaders at the July 1970 Coppermine Conference and by Inuit Tapirisat of Canada (now Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami) when it was created in 1971.¹⁴

In August 2016, the federal government appointed longstanding Inuit leader Mary Simon as special representative to Minister of Indigenous and Northern Affairs Carolyn Bennett, reflecting an important step in the Trudeau government’s commitment to co-develop its Northern policy with Indigenous peoples. Simon’s 2016 *Interim Report on the Shared Arctic Leadership Model* highlighted that a “long history of visions, action plans, strategies and initiatives being devised ‘for the North’ and not ‘with the North’.” She explained that closing the basic gaps between what exists in the Arctic and what other Canadians take for granted should form the core of the government’s new policy.¹⁵ The *Pan-Territorial Vision*, released by the territorial governments in 2017, reiterated these governments’ priorities and stressed the importance of resource development, economic diversification, innovation, and infrastructure to build stronger regional economies.¹⁶

The long co-development phase of the ANPF adopted a whole-of-government approach involving a wide array of departments and agencies in the region, the territorial governments, Quebec, Manitoba, and Newfoundland and Labrador. Regional roundtables, public submissions, and other face-to-face engagement initiatives solicited the input of Indigenous groups and other stakeholders. This new approach to policymaking stressed that “consultation was not enough” and strived to involve stakeholders “in the drafting of the document” to place “the future into the hands of the people who live there.”¹⁷

“A Shared Vision”: The framework

The main chapter of the ANPF lays out the issues, challenges, and opportunities facing Canada’s Arctic and northern regions and indicates the federal government’s primary goals and objectives. It details the impacts of climate change, particularly as it affects social and cultural norms, ways of knowing, and on-the-land activities. It also highlights the broad spectrum of socio-economic

challenges facing the North, ranging from lack of economic opportunity, to mental health challenges, to food insecurity, and gaps in infrastructure, health care, education, skills development, and income equality across the region. The framework notes the opportunities and challenges that stem from the North's youthful population, particularly in Nunavut where the median age is just over 26. In its effort to link existing federal initiatives to the ANPF, examples of how the government is already addressing some of these issues in collaboration with its Indigenous and territorial partners are scattered throughout the document.

The ANPF's first and primary goal is to create conditions so that "Canadian Arctic and northern Indigenous peoples are resilient and healthy." This priority animates the entire document. To achieve this, the ANPF pledges to end poverty, eradicate hunger, reduce suicides, close the gap on education outcomes, provide greater access to skills developments, adopt culturally appropriate approaches to justice issues, and eliminate the housing crisis in the North. As examples of action already taken, the document notes the government's ongoing efforts to "support better, more relevant and accessible education," funding and skills training for community-led food production projects, updates to Nutrition North, and its investment in new addictions treatment facilities in Nunavut and Nunavik. This patchwork of government initiatives has not impressed critics who lament that the framework fails to elucidate a coherent strategy or to establish clear metrics to address the dismal socio-economic and health indicators related to Canada's North. The document even fails to expand on relatively low-hanging fruit, such as the Harvesters Support Grant (an update to the Nutrition North program that the federal government announced in late 2018). The framework could have answered how this grant will be implemented – details that the government has promised to release for months.¹⁸ Despite few details about how the government actually plans to accomplish its overarching goal of "resilient and healthy" northern peoples and communities, this broad vision resonates with its strong commitment to reconciliation with Indigenous peoples, captured in the eighth goal: the promise of a future that "supports self-determination and nurtures mutually respectful relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples."

Between these two pillars are a broad range of challenges, opportunities, and promises that form a tangled web of underdeveloped priorities. The second goal is strengthened infrastructure, including broadband connectivity, multi-modal transportation infrastructure, multipurpose communications, energy, and transportation corridors, energy security and sustainability at the community-level, and social infrastructure. The ANPF points out that the government has already provided over \$190 million in funding for improvements and expansion of existing local air and marine infrastructure. While these community-focused initiatives are essential to the resilience and well-being of Northerners, the challenge remains how to justify the exorbitant costs associated with much larger "transformative investments in infrastructure." For example, the policy framework cites the federal government's investment of \$71.7 million through the National Trade Corridors Fund for four Nunavut transportation projects. This funding included \$21.5 million for preparatory work to the \$500-million Grays Bay Port and Road Project, which, if completed, would create the first road connecting Nunavut to the rest of Canada. The ANPF mentions the project once and provides no detail on how the government plans to support this massive endeavor moving forward. Furthermore, it is silent on how decision-makers will approach opponents of the project who argue that the road will threaten the Bathurst caribou herd. More generally, how will the government decide which infrastructure projects get what funding when the ANPF and partner documents reiterate that so much investment is required across the North?

The framework highlights the need for “strong, sustainable, diversified, and inclusive local and regional economies,” particularly through increased Indigenous ownership and participation, the reduction of income inequality, the optimization of resource development, economic diversification (including land-based, traditional economic activities), and the enhancement of trade and investment opportunities. It cites existing federal efforts such as the Jobs and Tourism Initiative and Canadian Northern Economic Development Agency’s Inclusive Diversification and Economic Advancement in the North (IDEANorth) program, which “makes foundational investments in economic infrastructure, sector development and capacity building.”¹⁹ The framework also highlights the idea of a “conservation economy” (which makes conservation an important part of local economies) that the federal government is slowly growing in the Arctic in collaboration with northern Indigenous stakeholders. For instance, the creation of Tallurutiup Imanga Marine Conservation Area, co-developed with the Qikiqtani Inuit Association, has involved the establishment of the Guardians program in Arctic Bay and funding to improve small craft harbours in the adjacent communities. Beyond these measures, however, the framework provides no action plan or economic model for how to grow and diversify the northern economy. How will the government approach the debate between those who want to heavily regulate resource development and those who believe regulations are strangling the northern economy — a conflict that the framework explicitly acknowledges? The consultations highlighted “co-management of renewable resources ... as a venue for collaborative management that can help integrate different viewpoints,” but the ANPF does not indicate how this will work in practice.

The framework’s fourth goal is to ensure that both Indigenous and scientific knowledge and understanding guide decision-making, and that Arctic and Northern peoples are included in the knowledge-creation process. While the government points to the funding it has already provided for Polar Continental Shelf Program and the Eureka Weather Station, the framework includes no specifics on how it will support and fund its proposed expansion of domestic and international northern research. The same lack of detail on funding and execution is also reflected in discussion of the government’s fifth goal, which focuses on ensuring healthy, resilient Arctic and northern ecosystems and promises action on a wide array of major objectives, ranging from mitigation and adaptation measures to climate change, to sustainable use of the ecosystems and species, and safe and environmentally-responsible shipping.

The sixth and seventh goals highlight measures to strengthen the rules-based international order in the Arctic. Emphasizing that the region is “well known for its high level of international cooperation on a broad range of issues,” and “despite increased interest in the region from both Arctic and non-Arctic states,” the ANPF commits to continued multilateral and bilateral cooperation in the Arctic. It confirms the Arctic Council as the “pre-eminent forum for Arctic cooperation” complemented by the “extensive international legal framework [that] applies to the Arctic Ocean.” There is muscular language proclaiming how Canada “is firmly asserting its presence in the North” and pledges to “more clearly define Canada’s Arctic boundaries” – a surprising statement given that Canada filed its Arctic continental shelf submission in May 2019, and one that seems to deviate from Canada’s longstanding insistence that “Canada’s Arctic sovereignty is longstanding, well-established and based on historic title, founded in part on the presence of Inuit and other Aboriginal peoples since time immemorial” (as written in Conservatives’ Northern Strategy). There are also peculiar statements, such as the need to

“regularize a bilateral dialogue with the United States on Arctic issues,” with no clear explanation of where the bilateral relationship is deficient or what this means.²⁰

The overall tenor, however, is generally optimistic and unabashedly projects Canada’s domestic priorities into the international sphere, emphasizing the desire for regional peace and stability so that “Arctic and northern peoples thrive economically, socially and environmentally.” Innovative elements include promises to “champion the integration of diversity and gender considerations into projects and initiatives, guided by Canada’s feminist foreign policy,” and increasing youth engagement in the circumpolar dialogue. Unfortunately, concrete examples of opportunities or new mechanisms to do so are not provided. Similarly, promises to help Arctic and northern businesses to pursue international opportunities “that are aligned with local interests and values” are welcome but vague, and the Trudeau government’s vision for the Arctic Economic Council (AEC) is unclear. Well-established priorities, such as food security, improving health care services, and suicide prevention, are presented with no reference whatsoever to what has been done to forward these agendas internationally. There are some discernable policy changes, however. NATO is presented as a “key multilateral forum” in the Arctic – a clear shift from the reticence of previous governments who feared unnecessarily antagonizing Russia by having the alliance articulate an Arctic focus. Concurrently, the policy commits to “restart a regular bilateral dialogue on Arctic issues with Russia in key areas related to Indigenous issues, scientific cooperation, environmental protection, shipping and search and rescue” – a welcome acknowledgment that, despite resurgent strategic competition and divergent interests elsewhere in the world, both countries have many common interests in the Arctic.²¹ Furthermore, Canada commits to “enhance the reputation and participation of Arctic and northern Canadians, especially Indigenous peoples, in relevant international forums and negotiations,” and to promote the “full inclusion of Indigenous knowledge” in polar science and decision making. Specific examples relating to the marine environment, particularly the visionary work of the Pikialasorsuaq Commission, point to the benefits of this approach.

The priorities in the standalone *Safety, Security, and Defence* chapter include Canada’s continued demonstration of sovereignty, the enhancement of the military presence in the region, the defence of North America, improved domain awareness, strengthened whole-of-society emergency management, and continued engagement with local communities, Indigenous groups, and international partners.²² Much of the discussion reiterates policy elements in Canada’s 2017 defence policy, *Strong, Secure, Engaged*. It also points to the work around marine safety already accomplished by the *Oceans Protection Plan*, which has expanded the Coast Guard Auxiliary in the North, created the Indigenous Community Boat Volunteer Pilot Program, extended the Coast Guard’s icebreaking season, and launched an Inshore Rescue Boat Station in Rankin Inlet.²³ Given the governmental action already taken through *SSE* and the *OPP*, this section of the ANPF provides the most detail on how the government aims to accomplish its objectives.

Moving forward: An unclear roadmap

While reiterating many complex challenges and opportunities facing the Arctic, and setting laudable goals such as ending poverty, eradicating hunger, and eliminating the housing crisis in the North, Canada’s “new” Arctic and Northern Policy Framework offers few substantive approaches or mechanisms to meet them. Nunavut Premier Joe Savikataaq called the policy a good beginning but noted, “We will be a lot happier when there is more tangible stuff that comes out.”²⁴ The

ANPF concludes with a promise that the government will have ten years to “translate its goals and objectives into reality” and advises that federal-territorial-provincial and Indigenous partners will co-develop solutions and new governance mechanisms. As Minister of Crown-Indigenous Relations and Northern Affairs Carolyn Bennett noted after the ANPF’s release, “you begin with the policy and then you work toward implementation ... It’s a matter of us now, as we move through each budget cycle of each government, having a road map for closing these gaps.”²⁵ With the Liberals securing a minority government in Canada’s October federal election, however, several key questions about this road map will need to be addressed:

How will the government implement the Arctic and Northern Policy Framework?

The absence of a coherent strategy embedded in the ANPF speaks to the complicated process of co-developing policies across a wide and disparate region. Many different voices need to be taken into account. The framework admits that the federal government and its partners could not reach consensus on various issues (undisclosed, of course). Will the federal government be able to co-develop initiatives in the face of differing opinions and priorities, especially around controversial issues such as resource and infrastructure development? How will the government balance its focus on a conservation economy with the desire of groups, such as the Kitikmeot Inuit Association or the Government of the Northwest Territories, for more non-renewable resource development? More generally, how will the federal government steer this extensive network of stakeholders as it works toward implementation over the next ten years? Will it be able to overcome disagreements and navigate lack of consensus in its efforts to move forward on the ANPF’s goals and objectives?

How do the partner chapters fit into the overall framework?

The inability to reach “unanimous agreement” on issues identified in the ANPF also explains one of the most confusing parts of the entire framework: the Inuit Nunangat, NWT, Nunavut and Pan-Territorial chapters that are included as appendices representing “the visions, aspirations and priorities of our co-development partners.” At the beginning of the document, the government asserts that these partner chapters were “crucial” to the co-development process, that they “map out areas of present and future” collaboration between the Government of Canada and its partners, and that they will “provide guidance” on its implementation. At the tail end of the document, however, a caveat notes that these perspectives “do not necessarily reflect the views of either the federal government, or of the other partners.” There is little indication throughout the framework on how exactly these chapters will inform federal policy-making, particularly in areas of disagreement. How will the framework reconcile some of the key differences in the partner chapters, particularly the NWT’s call for a “lifting of the Beaufort Sea Moratorium” and the creation of a co-management agreement for the “responsible and sustainable development” of the region’s offshore resources?²⁶ In April 2019, Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami president Natan Obed shed some light on the government’s continued struggle to truly co-develop policies with Northerners. “After four years, this government is still not necessarily understanding how to transform the working relationship,” he told a reporter. “... How the public service acts and the advice that it gives to any particular minister of the day has been entrenched for so long that we end up fighting that more than we fight the good intentions of ministers.”²⁷ Will the government be able to overcome its own centralizing tendencies to truly co-develop implementation measures that reflect the goals of their partners?

Where will the government's focus on Inuit Nunangat lead?

Throughout the co-development of the ANPF, Trudeau emphasized its “Inuit-specific component, created in partnership with Inuit” that would take Inuit Nunangat as the primary lens through which to view policies focused on Inuit. In April, Obed was asked whether the long-term goal for Inuit Nunangat was “a contiguous political space with similar jurisdiction to the provinces in the south. He replied: “Well, we’ll see where our self-determination takes us.”²⁸ In the end, the ANFP included an Inuit Nunangat chapter as an appendix, which may or may not reflect the views of the federal government. How will Ottawa operationalize its focus on Inuit Nunangat moving forward? Will it support the re-drawing of Canada’s political boundaries if self-determining Inuit decide that this is what they want? How will Inuit Nunangat, as a political jurisdiction, interact with the current roles and responsibilities of public territorial and provincial governments?

Notes

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14. Sarah Bonesteel, “Canada’s Relationship with Inuit: A History of Policy and Program Development,” June 2006, <https://www.aadnc-aandc.gc.ca/eng/1100100016900/1100100016908>.
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