



**Iqaluit, Nunavut**

# **Community Conversation Summary**

**March 5, 2023**

**CAMPAIGN 2000**  
END CHILD & FAMILY POVERTY



## Introduction

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Below, we've summarized the main themes of the community conversation with seven board members of *Amautiit Nunavut Inuit Women's Association* and one program director at the *Uquutaq Society* men's shelter in Iqaluit.

The conversation was hosted by *Amautiit Nunavut Inuit Women's Association* in partnership with *Campaign 2000: End Child and Family Poverty*. The participants were:

- Madeleine Redfern, Iqaluit, Amautiit Board
- Tara Tootoo Fotheringham, Headingley (formerly Rankin Inlet), Amautiit Board
- Priscilla Kuksuk, Ottawa (formerly Arviat), Amautiit Board
- Jasmine Redfern, Iqaluit, Amautiit Board
- Megan Porter, Gjoa Haven, Amautiit Board
- Dorothy Tootoo, Rankin Inlet, Amautiit Board
- Ningeolaa Killiktee, Kimmirut, Amautiit Board
- Pam O'Neill, Iqaluit, Men's shelter

This summary is structured in four sections reflecting the discussion prompts. Main themes with related content and quotes are presented for each topic. The conversation content will be further analyzed in consideration of community meetings held over the subsequent week in Iqaluit and with content from twenty conversations across the country to help create a community-driven indicator framework for localized poverty reduction and recommendations for action.

This summary was created after sending a draft to the participants and host organizations to see if these points sounded right, offer an opportunity for corrections or clarification, and ensure that they had the chance to hold and use this information as soon as possible. This finalized version (August 2023) reflects the feedback we received, and the content will be further analyzed over the next year with attention to that feedback. Thanks to everyone who participated and responded!

This content strives to be true to the voices, subject matter, and emotion of the very real and difficult experiences of colonization and poverty that were discussed. Content presented here reflects participant discussion and does not necessarily reflect Campaign 2000's mandate.

Historical and current realities that colonial governments and policies created conditions of poverty for Inuit in Nunavut were prominent themes, which affect all areas of life including food insecurity, housing insecurity and the high cost of living in Nunavut. There is an urgent need to remedy these issues through immediate and significant policy changes, accountability, and community supports, including effective income supports, hunting supports, and access to country food rights and culturally relevant food subsidies. Inuit-led decision-making and solutions in all areas are required.

## Prompt 1: Visions of a community with no poverty

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### Limitations of this prompt in the Nunavut context

- It's hard to imagine: Poverty is "so interwoven into every aspect of our lives. I don't live in poverty, but it's omnipresent in my life regardless. I have friends who live in poverty. I have people that I grew up with. Even people who I know have really good paying jobs. They still live in poverty regardless of how much money comes in [due to the high cost of living and wide-ranging impact of poverty in community]. And there's so much intergenerational impacts of poverty that are so hard to mitigate through policy, or programs. Because it really does affect every aspect of your life."
- Focusing on the vision can be limiting: In a thriving community, "there is no poverty. Everyone can eat. Everyone can get a livable wage. Everyone can have sufficient housing, and safe housing and that we have high rates of graduation. People get the training and the jobs that they want. And they've got opportunities for career advancement to the full desire and ability...That's all really easy to say. I think the problem is that when we say all that, is then usually the exercise stops."
- Ideas and plans for immediate action are more helpful: "What are some of the changes that can happen now. That could make a difference before. Because there's going to be a lot of work to ever try to get the ultimate vision. And is the ultimate vision even attainable? I don't know. ...What are some of the immediate things that can help people not be poor, and not be hungry?"

## Prompt 2: Experiences of poverty in Nunavut

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### Poverty is created by historic and current colonial government structures

- Poverty in Nunavut has been created and perpetuated by colonial governments: "Poverty stems exclusively, historically and currently, from government policy and decisions by government."
- Government policies have resulted in "an unsustainable and unaffordable territory."
- Every aspect of Inuit life was dictated and controlled by government: relocation, geographical location of communities, schools, housing – "there weren't enough houses built right from the beginning."
- The impacts are extremely clear – families that received the first homes and jobs "did well, and generally those families have done well for generations. Everyone else didn't, and haven't done well."
- This contributes to stigma and discrimination: "Your last name can affect the perception of your whole family and whether you get a job or you don't get a job."

- The creation of the territory also contributed to poverty: “A small class of people have done really well. But there's actually more poverty, and more food insecurity, more violence, more overcrowded housing since the creation of the territory.”
- Existing policies and legislation intended to support communities aren't effective or well-communicated:
  - “The Government of Nunavut passed legislation that allowed the stores to effectively donate food best before, but not all of them do. Because they don't have groups to donate, or the manager doesn't know. There's a high level of turnover. So they just throw some food out in the dump instead of making sure that it's just distributed.”
  - “Most social assistance recipients are required to fill in their application month, after month, after month right? Even though the legislation says that they can just fill it in once for that year and be presumed eligible for the remaining part of the year. The social assistance workers weren't aware of that. Or it's kind of discretionary. And so they just make people apply over and over, and over again, wasting their time.”

### Poverty affects everybody

- Poverty in Nunavut is omnipresent, multi-faceted, and affects everyone:
  - “When it's all around you, it really does feel just like this constant struggle to keep your head above water for everybody. But some of us have flotation devices, and some of us have a lot of ankle weights on us, you know? But that water is always there, and there's always the threat that any of us could drown at any point.”
- People who aren't living in poverty are often one pay cheque away from poverty
  - “At times I feel like I'm still living in poverty though I'm working full-time. The standard of living, it's so expensive.”
- Everyone is affected and “poor people [end up] helping poor people” rather than a redistribution of resources and wealth.

### Food insecurity

- Major failures of Nutrition North
  - Subsidies are limited and perpetuate colonial structures:
    - “It's people in Ottawa deciding what people in the North should be allowed to eat.”
    - “This whole mentality of people in the South making up all these decisions that have never lived in the North. That haven't understood... seen the challenges that there are.”
    - Examples: Certain shapes of pasta are subsidized, but not others. Milk alternatives aren't subsidized, even though some people are lactose intolerant. Vegan and vegetarian alternatives are subsidized but “virtually

nothing has been ever adequate or inclusive of supporting hunting and harvesting of our local foods. Which have been deemed even more nutritious.”

- Fast food, junk food is cheaper than whole foods from the Northern Store
- Lack of support of local, traditional food, even though “local food has been always proven to be more nutritious than store-bought food. More culturally enriching, and [with a] transfer of land skills like the value of a hunter being able to not only do what they do, but to transfer that knowledge to our youth ... it's huge, but we don't recognise that in any sort of proper way in a government program.”
- Retailers in the North have to abide by these rules from Ottawa because they are reliant on that subsidy to cover some freight costs.
- Stereotypes, racism, and bias are ingrained in the system and in staff beliefs; e.g. hunting is romanticized, ignored, or condemned:
  - “The problem of the stereotypes is huge. So you either have ignorance, wilful ignorance, racism, or romantic racism ... there's a general mistrust of hunting by urban people.”
- Challenges with sealift orders:
  - Nutrition North recommendations do not reflect people’s actual situations – they suggest that everyone do a sealift order to save money, but this is not an accessible option for many people:
  - “You understand that people live pay cheque to pay cheque. You also understand that there's not necessarily room in their house to store an annual sealift. There are children who sleep in the laundry rooms of their housing units because there's no room anywhere else with overcrowding.”
  - There’s also no sealift program – have to order it individually.
  - There’s no way to get approved for a sealift order and pay it back slowly.
- Hunger
  - Being hungry is one of the biggest issues – children shouldn’t be starving, but it’s common for children to be hungry, to arrive at programs or schools hungry.
  - Families are starving, that leads to violence, to health problems.
- Traditional food
  - It’s an Inuit value to share traditional and country foods with others, but people are now selling traditional food because the costs for hunting are so high that they can no longer afford to share, and there is sometimes not enough to go around anyway:

- “There are so many people outside of each little family circle that are starving. That wish they could just have a piece of meat. ... Could have traditional foods that they're not privy to anymore.”
    - For everyone, reliance on sharing food with neighbours, family, friends, is high.
  - Examples of the high costs of hunting:
    - “They can't afford to give a lot of their country food away because the money that they sell from their country food helps offset going out. It's \$25,000 at the low end to buy a boat. \$15,000 low end to buy a motor. A Skidoo, \$15,000. The gun, hundreds of dollars. The bullets. The oil for the snow mobile. The oil for the boat motor.”
    - “When my brother or nephew goes out hunting they spend \$1,000 on fuel for the boat, and they may or may not be successful in that hunt.”
    - “It used to be that it was proven that a hunter would support seven households. They can't anymore. They can barely support their own.”
  - Young people are less often taught and trained to hunt well
- Need for food banks and programs:
  - Even people who are working are forced to use food banks. But not every community has a food bank.
  - Not every school in the territory has a breakfast and/or lunch program.

### Income and income assistance

- Employment income
  - Wages for employment are too low – there is incentive to access income assistance instead because it can be higher.
  - Barriers to adequate income: “You have to be highly educated to have a stable income.”
- Income assistance
  - People receive the same amount in all the communities, even though the prices, subsidies, and cost of living is different from community to community.
  - From one community perspective, receiving cash (instead of a charge card, or grocery store account for example) has created more poverty. People spend it on things other than food and then don't have enough to buy food and have to use the food bank by the end of the month.
  - Others pointed out that this shows the level of need and a scarcity mindset:
    - “We've got so many people that are in desperate need, and desperate people do desperate things.”
    - “If you have most of your life lived in poverty, not knowing what it's like to have food in your cupboard consistently. Or to know that you have the stuff for the next meal...You sometimes just think ‘Well you know what?’

I'm going to spend this one this because now I feel like that's my reward.' Even though it's meant for food."

- Another example: NTI [Nunavut Tunngavik Inc.] gave out gas vouchers to beneficiaries intended to support hunters. But "people that don't even go hunting took advantage of it and are selling it to people." This is the level of need: "If you're living in poverty, and can't eat, and you can get a free \$750 voucher, and sell it for \$500 to a taxi driver, so you can eat, I understand why someone does that. I mean it doesn't meet the purpose or the target, but I get it."
- Surveillance culture of income assistance:
  - Clients are denied their assistance or it's clawed back because their worker can see if they receive additional informal income elsewhere, especially in smaller communities
  - E.g. winning bingo on the local radio, selling artwork on social media, etc.

## High cost of living

- Because living in Nunavut is so expensive, even with a high paying job, it can be hard to make ends meet at the end of the month.
- Government tries to make utilities affordable through subsidy program, Northern living allowance, tax deductions for living in Nunavut, but these are not accurate enough and nowhere near they should be to offset the true cost of living in Nunavut.
- The further north you go, the prices get higher and higher.

## Housing

- High cost of housing
  - Impact of creation of territory: "A one-bedroom apartment before the creation of the territory in the high rise was \$750. Now it's \$2,000 because of the subsidy. So the housing subsidy has absolutely exaggerated the housing cost. Whether in the private rental market or to buy a house."
  - Social assistance income is not adequate to pay for a home or an apartment – if there was anything to buy or rent – but there isn't.
  - No possibility of buying a house, having the down payment, unless you have a very high income.
- Amount of private home ownership in territory is very limited:
  - Most of private home ownership is in Iqaluit, the rest is in Rankin Inlet and Cambridge Bay. Home ownership in smaller communities is essentially non-existent.
  - Biggest housing suppliers are public housing and staff housing.
- Employer-supplied housing:

- This is common and makes people especially vulnerable: “You’ve got seven days to move out of your staff-supplied housing if they fire you, or you quit.”
- Results in poor treatment or harassment from employer going unchecked because you rely on them for housing.
- Public housing:
  - It takes years and years to get into public housing, which results in overcrowding because there is not enough supply to house people.
  - “They’re forced to have 18 and 20 people in a house.”
- Shelters:
  - Supposed to be a temporary stay, but people are staying for years because there’s nowhere for them to transition to.

### Employment and education

- The number of jobs in smaller communities is fixed: “The only way you get a job is that someone quits, someone is fired, someone dies.”
- Many jobs require a certain level of education, and you must leave your community to get that training.
  - “That requires a whole bunch of stars aligning ...and sacrifices to make that happen.”
  - Makes it feel pointless to get a grade 12 diploma because you still can’t get a job.
- Barriers within the school system:
  - High schools don’t have all the courses necessary to set students up for postsecondary: “We had students that graduated Grade 12. Didn’t have any Biology and Chemistry, and applied for a science program. They couldn’t even go in because they didn’t have it. That’s a prerequisite.”
  - Students are told to try online courses instead, but there are major difficulties with internet services.
  - So many bright youth get left behind and are unable to pursue education until they do “layers and layers of upgrading.”

### Trauma, mental health, violence and addiction

- Intergenerational trauma (from the violence of colonialism) affects so many people on so many different levels, and affects those around them:
  - “You can’t lead by example if you’re so traumatised that you can’t or [have] never actually tried to heal your trauma in you. You can’t move forward or teach people. Or be there for the people that actually need you the most because you’re so focused on your hurt that you can’t think outside of the box ... there’s so much behind poverty.”



- As a result of trauma, “it's not surprising that people have sometimes turned to substances as a form of self-medicating. To numb yourself from your reality or what happened to you.”
  - High levels of addiction in all communities – drug and alcohol abuse. Money goes towards this and contributes to poverty.
- Very limited options for mental health/trauma support
  - 50% of counselling positions in Nunavut before COVID were vacant – most of those were non-Inuit coming in from the South, and just once a month for smaller fly-in communities – for many people with historical family trauma, trauma in their own lives, mental health issues, addictions.
  - Counsellors often quit – they don't realize and aren't trained for the amount of trauma people are carrying. Turnover continues.
  - “I've known one woman who was schizophrenic and she never spoke to the same counsellor month, after month, or year after year. And she's just tired of explaining her trauma over, and over, and over again to a new person that she gave up.”
- Violence and suicide stemming from poverty, food insecurity, trauma, lack of supports/resources:
  - Nunavut has the “highest rate of violent crime in the country,” which creates a huge burden on health system, but requires context to understand it properly: “You put any sort of family of any society in 18 people living in a two or three bedroom, living food insecure, in poverty, you will get the same outcomes... There's nothing about this that makes it an Inuit problem, or an Arctic problem. You put anyone in that situation ... people are stressed, anxious, fearful, angry. And sometimes it leads to violence... And high rates of suicide.”

### Lack of accurate and relevant data

- No definition of poverty or accurate data on it for Nunavut:
  - Intentional invisibilizing of poverty in the past: “The very first Premier of Nunavut actually wouldn't even allow the word poverty to be said or published. Let alone defined, because if you don't define it, you never speak of it, it doesn't exist.”
  - Since then, there is still no single definition of poverty for the territory, making it more difficult to measure: “Depending on how you define poverty, you can get very different results.”
  - Results in a lack of accurate, culturally relevant data on poverty, and particularly poverty for specific populations/intersections: “I can't tell you, and I promise you the Government of Nunavut, no one could tell you this anywhere, which is the poorest community. We don't know. We couldn't tell you actually how many single mothers with children are in poverty. Yes, you can go to Stats Can, but those numbers are so wrong. So inaccurate, that under no circumstance is that

the real number. We couldn't tell you how many elders are in poverty, and there's very little gendered information, class information. Working poor, you know? And what is the poverty line?"

- Similar issues with other statistics
  - Graduation rates: Government stopped reporting what graduation rates are in the territory over 10 years ago. Pushed students through to increase graduation rate, without attaining a certain level of education or skills – but then students didn't have skills to actually obtain jobs.
  - Unemployment: Can't measure it by people receiving Employment Insurance because very few people actually do, but there's a huge number of people who aren't employed.

### Lack of action

- Disheartening to not see anything change: "I feel like everybody has just stopped talking about it because we realise that nothing is ever really changing. We're choking on our own air just trying to talk, and talk, and talk, and talk, and talk."
- All the interconnected challenges can contribute to inaction: "There are so many things that are intertwined in everything that we do. It's not about any one thing...Everything together, it makes people feel like they're so overwhelmed and they don't know where to start."
- Burnout from trying so hard but not seeing change: "People are spent. People are so overwhelmed already within their own workplace, their other volunteer jobs. There's only so many things that a person can do year after year" – and it's always the same people at the same meetings.

## Prompt 3: What is working in your community?

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### Inuit values and traditions

- Sharing and helping community members
  - Sharing country foods, in small communities especially.
  - Helping neighbours – bringing over pantry items.
  - People ask when they need help, people offer when they have leftover, and help others in their community.
  - "Let's say their Ski-doo broke down. They go on [the radio] asking for help. And there's going to be a bunch of people going over to go and help. This is our skill. It's one of the good things about a small town. We don't sell our country food, we give it out."
- Respect for elders

- Community members wanting to learn traditional skills, to be able to go out on the land and contribute to their community

### Programs, services, and supports

- Business development grants and support for entrepreneurs.
  - Still a long way to go, but even a small side business gives people freedom, flexible additional income.
- Skill-building programs, like sewing programs or small engine mechanic repair programs.
  - Not intended as means for people to supplement income, but that's an unintended outcome.
  - Wellness outcomes – people learn skills and have pride in their work. Offering programs as wellness programs often means they are more accessible and not during workday hours.
  - Programs that help people purchase materials are also useful.
- Services: Shelters, food banks, food centres, community groups in Iqaluit

### People

- Sometimes great people move into the community – teach interesting and important skills – but then they leave, and it's difficult to train people to continue.
  - “Someone comes and they have a passion to share and it's amazing. And they do really make a difference at that point in time. What's hard is, as I said, it's rarely sustainable.”
- Sometimes government or organization staff can make a big difference in how they approach the role and choose to not make people's lives difficult.

### Limitations of this question

- Caution when considering these successes: “It's just not enough you know? [Some] communities don't have those. Or even in Iqaluit where we do have them, [programs] are constrained by budgets, constrained by not enough units. ... So, we have some successes. But I'm cautious about sort of saying that they are always in place. Because they're just as fragile, or as vulnerable as often the people they serve. ... Don't under any circumstance think that they've met their own internal delivery, capacity needs.”
- One example: Having Parks Canada in Gjoa Haven created jobs, but no transformative benefits. “There's investment happening in communities, but is it well done?”
- It can also be hard to think of what's working: “I can't even think of anything. There's so many people struggling and ... you see it every day and I feel like you can't even fix it even if you try.”

## Prompt 4: Actions that the government needs to take are...

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### Fix government programs, policies, and subsidies

- Fix programs like Nutrition North and its subsidies:
  - “There's no way to fix poverty unless the programs are fixed. Because we are so reliant on those programs that are supporting the retailers in the North. And then eventually supporting the airlines to be better. So, people have choices.”
  - Prices need to be lower.
- Be proactive with preventative investments, rather than pay at the other end.
  - Foster care: “The foster care parents in this territory get approximately \$1,000 plus per kid. Instead of actually the parent being able to get the money they need to not live in poverty that causes all sorts of problems.”
  - Prison and legal system: “We are prepared to pay money when people get into trouble with the law with defense lawyers, Crown Prosecutors, police, the courts and put people in prison. At a cost of \$150,000 plus a year. And that's just the prison cost.”
  - Instead – be proactive and preventative, help people not live in trauma and in poverty, give them the supports that are needed.

### Schools and education

- Breakfast and lunch program in every school:
  - This would mean attendance would rise, so build capacity in schools first: have more classrooms, more teachers, more administrators.
- Teach financial literacy, budgeting, long-term financial sustainability in the school system:
  - Set people up for success: “Giving cheques to people to have to manage is good, but I think there should be some sort of training around it. Like what are you going to do with this money? How are you going to spend it?”
  - “We're not doing that. We're just saying ‘Here's the money, fail.’ But once again we have to start fixing the solutions by starting in the schools.”
- Education should not just be in the colonial school system – there should be Inuit-led education, Inuit programs, language and culture:
  - “Life skills, and being able to communicate, and quit holding all that anger.”
  - Teach children and youth about sharing and the value of each decision you make.

### Effective supports for country food and hunting

- Local food is more nutritious than store-bought food, more culturally enriching, allows for skill-building, and transferring knowledge to youth.

- Needs to be recognized properly through a government program.
- Or through the land claim agreement: “The Cree of Northern Quebec, the James Bay Cree, under their Land Claim Agreement they pay hunters to go hunting. ...they actually have the most progressive Land Claim Agreement, and the Government of Canada refused to include that in every single agreement since then.”
- Government should provide support for hunters that does not stereotype or romanticize them, but supports them as complex people with evolving circumstances:
  - “There’s this tendency to really want to be supportive of hunters in a specific way...where it aligns with this romantic, idealised version of somebody who’s in tune with the land. [That] forgets that they’re also real people with real families, and real lives.”
- Address the colonial attitudes, stereotypes, and lack of understanding that government brings to hunting:
  - “Ottawa just is not a hunting culture...Even if you go to a meeting and tell them, it goes out their one ear and out the other once they’ve left the room. Like they don’t care. Even when we talk about like the costs. You can’t really explain how intensive it is, how labour intensive it is. How long it takes. The amount of prep – it’s days to get ready for a hunting trip. And there’s so many aspects and components that if you didn’t grow up around it you just don’t know, and it’s even hard to tell someone because you don’t know what they don’t know.”

### Build capacity for Inuit-led solutions and data collection

- Policies need to be properly evaluated by the people they affect:
  - “What happens with government policy is that they evaluate it themselves, how are we doing? They don’t ask the clients, that’s a huge problem.”
- Build support systems that are robust, build capacity “so we actually have our people being able to provide the support.”
- Importance, relevance, and feasibility of Inuit-led data collection:
  - “In Cambridge Bay, the municipality was literally going to go door to door and talk to every household about what their reality was. Other than Iqaluit you could do that in every community. You could hire people from that community, that people trust, and collect that data. And reveal the truth, but we instead have these public meetings like the Anti-Poverty Secretary travelled around...instead of actually hiring people in the communities to go to people’s homes. And to go with like a \$50 food voucher...There needs to be trust and understanding what the value of that data collection is. So, it’s not going to be used against them, and it’s going to be truly anonymized.”

### Real action

- Concrete action, rather than repetitive discussion and reports

- "We've been talking about this. I've been around 30 plus years saying the same stuff. And it's just another report."
- "We continue to have these kind of things over and over."
- "There's so much talk that there's no action being done."