

# The collaboration imperative in modern policy-making

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In the first of this series of three columns I said that [many Inuit want a better balance between modern government and their traditional way of life](#). They want government that can make decisions and act in their community's interest, but that also invites the community, its organizations and people to solve their problems together.

In the second column we saw how Nunavut Premier Eva Aariak is working to find such a balance through initiatives like the Poverty Reduction Process, the Roundtable on Poverty Reduction, and [legislation that could create new responsibilities for government to collaborate](#).

This third and final column considers whether, in the end, these efforts could weaken rather than strengthen the government. Opinion is divided. For example, inside the senior ranks of the public service, support for the Poverty Reduction Process was mixed. While some senior officials were enthusiastic, others were not.

Those who had doubts worried that public engagement could commit the government to plans and actions that were not adequately researched or that had little to do with a department's key responsibilities, as approved by the Legislative Assembly. A few even saw the process as unfocused, undisciplined and even coercive. This is not how government should work, they objected.

What should we make of such concerns?

Let's start by reminding ourselves why collaboration is important, not just in Nunavut, but for governments everywhere. Today, citizens expect their governments to pursue complex societal goals, such as poverty reduction, sustainable development or healthy communities.

Indeed, every major government in Canada (and most other countries) makes explicit commitments to such goals at the highest level of its strategic plan.

The Government of Canada, for example, is supposed to be focused on [16 key outcomes](#), which include healthy Canadians, a clean and healthy environment, and a prosperous Canada through global commerce.

Goals like these cannot be achieved by government alone. Businesses, NGOs, communities and citizens all have a role to play. In short, collaboration is a condition of their achievement.

From this perspective, the collaborative approach championed by Premier Aariak poses an interesting dilemma for governments everywhere. On one hand, it suggests that modern governments lack the needed capacity (resources and authorities) to achieve their official goals.

On the other hand, building this capacity means collaborating. However, getting citizens, communities, NGOs and businesses to work with government to achieve such goals requires giving them a real and meaningful say in forming the plan.

In practice, this means moving beyond conventional consultation and engaging the public in real partnerships based on shared decision-making, planning and action. In short, collaboration requires empowerment.

So here's the lesson: either governments must give up on their highest official goals, or they must change how they do business. We might call this the governance dilemma.

Aariak's answer for Nunavut is clear. New tools such as the Roundtable on Poverty Reduction and the proposed new legislation are important steps toward building this capacity.

Moreover, once we understand their real purpose, we can see that nothing in these tools divests the government of its authorities, responsibilities or accountability. Nor would they compel the government to do anything it genuinely believes is wrong.

On the contrary, the tools are designed to help government learn to work with citizens, communities and stakeholders in new ways so that they, in turn, will want to work with government.

Collaboration thus is not about weakening or taking control of government. It is about sharing the responsibility for real progress on goals like climate change, healthy communities, sustainable development and poverty reduction.

As such, it is also the right way to strike a better balance between the traditional Inuit way of life and modern parliamentary government. This returns us to Article 32, which was raised in the first of these three columns:

...Inuit have the right...to participate in the development of social and cultural policies, and in the design of social and cultural programs and services, including their method of delivery, within the Nunavut Settlement Area.

If, as [The Makimaniq Plan says](#), poverty reduction requires community healing and a new sense of self-reliance, the Roundtable provides a safe and effective way for the government to act on Article 32 by agreeing to work closely with communities to implement The Plan.

While the Roundtable is only a first step, it could mark the beginning of a new and on-going cycle of dialogue and action that leads to real, transformational change through the development of new skills, knowledge, expertise, relationships and, most importantly, a rebuilding of trust between Inuit and the government.

Supporting this with appropriate legislation is a further and appropriate step along this path. The days when government planning and policy-making were the sole responsibility of government officials are disappearing, not just in Nunavut, but in governments everywhere.

Today, there is growing recognition of the need to engage the public in making choices, developing plans and taking action for the achievement of important goals. This not only leads to stronger, healthier communities, but to more effective and responsive governments.

From this viewpoint, Premier Aariak's original concern that Inuit have become too reliant on government and must rebuild their traditional sense of self-reliance takes on a larger, pan-Canadian significance.

It is not just a call for the government and citizens of Nunavut to change their ways. It is equally a call for governments across the country to do so. For their part, Nunavummiut seem prepared to do more than talk. They are ready to act. As they say in Québec, *Chapeau!*

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