Exploring Community Mobilization in Northern Quebec: Motivators, Challenges, and Resilience in Action

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Highlights

• We spoke with Inuit of northern Quebec who are actively involved in supporting community wellbeing.
• Supporting children in becoming leaders of tomorrow is a primary motivation for community members.
• Community members speak of the different challenges in community mobilization.
• Perseverance is the foundation of mobilization and is a unique marker of resilience.

Abstract Nunavimmiut (people of the land) are the Indigenous peoples of the northern peninsula of the province of Quebec. Communities of Nunavik and its regional organizations have been making concerted efforts in implementing community-based strategies to support family wellbeing. These community strategies are grounded in many of the values underpinning community psychology: favoring empowerment-oriented approaches, fostering community capacity, and transforming organizational cultures to allow for new modes of interaction, as well as new policies and practices that are grounded in community and culture. Despite the growing support and expectation for community mobilization, there is still very little research on the processes and challenges to such mobilization. In this study, we explored the unique challenges and facilitators to community endeavors in northern Quebec in order to better understand the complex dynamics and the strengths that Inuit build upon. We first used a focused ethnographic approach in the context of a 5-year community mobilization project in Nunavik. We then conducted 12 individual interviews and two small group interviews with Inuit working on community-based wellbeing-oriented mobilization projects in four additional communities. Results expose how sociogeographical realities and colonialism influence the process of community mobilization. They also highlight the values and motivational factors that lead community members to move beyond these influences.

Keywords Community Mobilization • Indigenous health and wellbeing • Resilience

Introduction

Health and social services are generally designed by and for persons from a dominant social group, with marginalized persons and communities often having reduced access to such services; this due to a variety of factors related to geographical, financial, social, and cultural barriers (Asanin & Wilson, 2008; Marrone, 2007). For decades, activists have sought to reduce health and social inequalities by promoting the adaptation of services for underrepresented groups and cultural minorities (Smye & Browne, 2002). This includes Indigenous people of North America who have been submitted to two centuries of colonialist policies and practices within health, social, and
educational institutions (Adelson, 2005; King, Smith, & Gracey, 2009; Richmond & Ross, 2009).

The term decolonization has been used to describe a process that goes beyond adapting services in relation to generalized “cultural” references to a paradigm shift within which rules, norms, values, and approaches to services are built around Indigenous values and practices (Smith, 1999). Decolonization in health care recognizes the history of inequalities as well as the value of Indigenous knowledges in the creation of programs and services.

Decolonization is a process that is grounded in notions of empowerment and in the value of engaging communities. Empowerment, including the act of shared participation in the creation of local programs and services, is an Indigenous determinant of health (Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami, 2015; Reading & Wien, 2009). It is understood that this co-creative process will render the services more fitting and ensure the actual use of its resources by the people it is meant to support (Eversole, 2015; Marent, Forster, & Nowak, 2012).

With this recent orientation toward Indigenous community mobilization and the adaptation and creation of services, many communities are invited to begin with a “blank slate.” They are offered resources and asked to reimagine what is culturally and contextually appropriate and thereby implement their own programming, at times in the context of new organizations, with expectations that these be governed by traditional ways. However, literature suggests that this form of community mobilization and organizational development is not only challenging, but can come at a cost (Cooke & Kothari, 2001; Fraser, Vrakas, Laliberté, & Mickpegak, 2018). Cooke and Kothari (2001) explain how mobilization of groups with relatively little political power can lead to feelings of disempowerment when, despite their engagement and the development of clear visions, these visions are difficult to transform into reality for structural and political reasons. Community mobilization requires a variety of social and community ingredients that are not always present (Guishard, 2009; Metzger, Alexander, & Weiner, 2005) including previous experience, availability of community resources, community attitude toward change, social vitality, economic opportunities, and strong leadership (Feinberg, Greenberg, & Osgood, 2004; Lockhart, 1979). It may therefore be important to reflect on processes and steps towards community mobilization that are realistic and adapted to the specific contexts in which they take place. To do so, it is important to better understand the experiences that people have when attempting to mobilize communities in contexts of social and political hardships as well to understand the strengths that they build on.

Little is known about the influence of factors such as community remoteness and size, large-scale exposure to trauma, and the long-range social impacts of colonization on community mobilization, such as is the experience of many Canadian Indigenous communities. We explore these questions via a focused ethnography of a community-based participatory project in a community of Nunavik and qualitative interviews in four other communities.

Context

Nunavik is the northern region of the province of Quebec, Canada, and home to 13,700 persons. Populations in its 14 communities (including non-Inuit inhabitants) vary between 230 and 2,700. Communities are accessible from the “South” only by plane. There are no roads linking them together, though snowmobiles and boats allow nearby communities to maintain contact with each other.

Traditionally, families and clans of approximately 30 individuals travelled between summer and winter camps relying on hunting, fishing, harvesting, and sewing skills to survive, often living precariously due to harsh climates and unreliable food supplies (Abbott, Mastroianni, & Sturges, 2003). In the early 1900s, certain Inuit families and clans had settled in or near trading posts, religious missions, and whale hunting sites, engaging in trade with recently arrived foreigners (Abbott et al., 2003). Kinship networks were significantly threatened when epidemics of smallpox and tuberculosis brought by settlers initially eradicated entire families and clans. By the 1940 and 1950s, many Inuit were in a precarious position as the fur and whaling trades had diminished. Some moved to villages in search of employment, while others relocated to enroll their children in school, the only way to receive the government financial assistance that permitted access to needed food and medical supplies. In the 1950s, treatments for tuberculosis had become available, though were offered only in the South, resulting in the separation of children from care providers and providers from dependents, with some never returning home. Government and church run residential schools and day schools contributed significantly to the breakdown of family kinship structures (Condon, 1990). Children were often forbidden to speak their own language or practice their own culture. Some were removed from their homes. These separations have had lasting intergenerational consequences for individuals and families (King, 2006; TRC, 2012, 2015). Additionally, with the transition from tents and igloos to homes constructed of materials shipped from the South, multigenerational families lived in overcrowded settings without a self-sufficient means to expand housing as needed, a reality that still affects over 25% of the population today (Duhaime, Lévesque, & Caron, 2015).

Current social and political challenges include overcrowding, lack of jobs, and minimal health and social resources. Each community has a nursing clinic inclusive of
both medical and social services and a child welfare service. For specialized care, Nunavimmiut fly to the regional hospitals in the two larger communities, Kuujjuaq or Puvirnituq, or to Montreal. Many suggest that the lack of prevention and therapeutic services coupled with the high need for psychosocial and family support underlies current social concerns such as an increasing number of child placements under child welfare services, and high rates of alcohol misuse, trauma, and suicide (Bombay, Matheson, & Anisman, 2011; Griffiths, Coleman, Lee, & Madden, 2016).

In the face of these challenges, several Inuit leaders and community members have taken on the task of searching for a better fit between the services that have been implanted from the South and local policies, practices, and traditions (both formal and informal) while simultaneously addressing the changing landscape of community needs (Fraser et al., 2018; Parnasimautik, 2015). Active attempts are being made to transform existing institutions while supporting the creation of new community-based and culturally driven organizations and programs.

Such initiatives include the development of “community family houses,” social justice mobilization projects, and suicide prevention. Other more specific mobilization programs include on the land healing activities for youth, a sexual-abuse prevention program, youth-led decision-making groups, parenting programming, sexual abuse prevention programs, and more.

Method

The objective of the study was to better understand how Inuit living in northern Quebec experience processes of community mobilization and to identify the contextual elements that influence their experiences. The study was led by the first author, a colonial settler researcher from Montreal who has been conducting community mobilization and action research with Inuit partners in Nunavik for 7 years. This study included two distinct phases.

In the first phase of the study, the researcher and assistant researchers were collaborators in a community-based action research aimed at promoting and documenting community mobilization for the wellbeing of children, youth, and families by finding community solutions to family needs. The PI was invited by local and regional leaders to support this community-based participatory research (CBPR) (see Fraser et al., 2018 for more details). The mobilization process included identifying key partners to form a local advisory board, animating four community mobilization workshops over a two-year period, holding community events, activities and workshops for families, door-to-door surveys, individual interviews, community radio events, naming and logo contests, co-producing community newsletters, a Facebook page, and more. All events were determined by the advisory board and were coordinated and animated by various community members with the support of the advisory board and/or the research team.

It was agreed by all partners that the first author and research assistants would be permitted to keep detailed field notes concerning activities, discussions, and group meetings throughout the mobilization. The first author and the partners of the CBPR on mobilization had ongoing discussions about what should be recorded in notes to ensure informed and ongoing consent. The team took field notes over a 5-year period. Notes included descriptions of situations, perceptions, reflections of the writers, and notes of reflective discussions with the partners. These notes were analyzed to extract all material related specifically to the experiences regarding community mobilization and more specifically the facilitators and barriers to mobilization. These experiences were discussed with the advisory board of the project during group meetings in order to identify the messages that advisory board members wished to share with other communities and with the scientific community. An ongoing question we all had was whether the experiences regarding mobilization were unique to this specific community and how other communities would be able to relate to these experiences and learnings.

In order to explore this further, a second study was conducted. The protocol was co-developed with three Inuit partners heavily engaged in community mobilization and living in three different communities. Once the main objectives were identified, a non-Indigenous research assistant with previous experience in mobilization and with prior relationships with community members conducted three pilot interviews to explore the themes that would naturally emerge from an open interview process. With an Inuk youth, the principal investigator and a non-indigenous research assistant read over the interviews, extracted themes, and developed a semi-structured interview guide. A snowball methodology was used to recruit participants. A total of 12 individual interviews and two group interviews (two and three participants) were conducted with community members who are actively involved in diverse community mobilization projects in one of five communities of Nunavik. Individual interviews were done by an Inuk and non-Inuk research assistant. Group interviews were done with a third person, an Inuk partner in charge of supporting community mobilization in communities across Nunavik. Participants were between the ages of 20 and 65. Interviews were approximately one hour long. Participants were asked to speak about their experience with community mobilization with prompts exploring the challenges and supports they faced. Interviews were transcribed and read in their entirety three times.

Next, the principal investigator and two non-Indigenous research assistants inductively double-coded the interviews with the support of the Inuk research coordinator who had
participated in identifying key informants and conducting interviews. Once the themes emerged, we returned to the data to extract verbatim that corresponded to the different themes. Finally, we discussed the choice of themes and the content of each theme with two Inuk co-authors in order to refine our understanding of the results and ensure appropriateness of the presentation of results. Citations were identified to reflect the different findings and then slightly modified, with names changed in order to protect anonymity.

Results

A first observation during data analysis of interviews was that challenges and facilitators of community mobilization were generally found within the same interview segments. Participants described a process of change, moving from places of difficulty to places of strength. This resonated with our field experience where challenges were often met by a wave of hope and desire to move forward and find solutions. Therefore, in order to remain authentic to the data, we organized themes not around challenges and facilitators but around components of a complex process inclusive of elements of difficulty and strength.

Igniting a spark

Participants described their motivations to lead community mobilization projects as emerging from their perception of community needs and their desire to offer support to the next generations. They identified community concerns such as high rates of suicide, difficult family dynamics, perceived lack of youth in decision-making positions, the high number of placements of youth under child welfare services, high number of people being sent to prison, and more. Some related these concerns to the direct outcomes of colonial practices. As an example, a participant described the inter-generation effects of residential schools: “Parents whose children are taken away are also grieving and turn to alcohol. Today’s parents were raised by those who attended residential schools.” Participants also spoke of their fear that youth are losing their language and culture. This concern was a strong motivation to participate in community mobilization.

With these issues in mind, participants spoke of their desire to participate in positive community change for future generations. A young woman who took on a position within the health services with a mandate of connecting community members and services explained:

I want to teach people around me to be more positive and healthy. I’m happy to be the voice of a more positive message. I’ve seen many cases of violence that could have been prevented with education and I want to do more for our people. I don’t want the next generation to make the same mistakes. (Community member)

Similarly, in our field work, partners rallied around community challenges; however, the driving force was the wellbeing and future of children of the community. Participants’ engagement in initiatives generally started during informal or community meeting discussions where they would speak of such issues with others and want to act promptly. Learning about projects taking place in other communities also ignited a spark, a sense of confidence: “if they can do it, we can do it too.”

A participant shared her experience attending a community meeting:

Yea it’s a really nice way where like, the people and the youth they have the chance to have a voice, and they are learning. The traditional knowledge and everything, the modern, it’s all like being passed on without people even realizing that they are passing it on. (Community member)

As described by the participant, gatherings for community mobilization have many benefits. They allow for people to connect, share, and be together in a way that they may not in their everyday lives. They are experienced as moments of hope and positivity. Participants have a feeling that community members with different life experiences all share a common vision for their community.

A participant explained that she already had a strong sense of what her community needed prior to community meetings and mobilization projects. What made her choose to participate in a project or not was whether she had the impression that the project would allow for her vision to take place and whether there would be openness to her views. She described this process of deciphering the project and the people involved as taking time and requiring continued dialogue.

Community leaders were described by many participants as playing a very important role in supporting and leading these community exchanges and events. Leaders encouraged and, at times, mandated people and organizations to attend such meetings, and then ensured follow-ups. Building on small actions people would develop a positive feeling that encouraged future involvement in mobilization. One participant described how after being invited to a community mobilization workshop she and her friend found a common interest and motivation:

We had two people come into the town (for a mobilization workshop). We were trying to make up activities
for the youth and we had this event, at the end of this workshop we decided like, we can do this, we need like a youth group.

(Community member)

Other ways of engaging community participation in mobilization included organizing community activities such as community cooking, sewing night, beading night, festive events, family activities, and fundraising. Such events mobilized greater numbers of people within the community who would show active involvement in events or in the project. For example, in support of local families, community members brought donations (toys, clothing, food), prepared food to share, and shared in organizing activities for individuals and families in the community. Community members sometimes took days off of work to partake in community workshops. Participants demonstrated and spoke of feeling energized and increasingly hopeful for their community when coming together around a common vision and mission. This encouraged some to take a more active and consistent role in community development projects.

Adapting to community realities

As visionaries seeking to implement collective action, participants spoke of an important limitation in sustaining mobilization, that of human resources. Participants spoke of three realities that influenced availability and participation of community members in ongoing mobilization efforts: (a) Those engaged in change were often already consumed by existing work, family demands, and community issues; (b) tasks involved in sustaining mobilization were felt as being onerous; and (c) some community members might not feel that they have the right to participate in community change and speak-up in such contexts.

Findings indicate that mobilization requires a “torch-bearer” who can move a project forward in a consistent fashion as well as active involvement of many individuals. Due to limited human resources, community members end up with many projects and responsibilities. A participant described a situation where she came to a community mobilization meeting with ideas and information to help start a project but was unable to get people on board.

I think they were too busy with their ideas and with the things that were already going on. And maybe they weren’t prepared to take on new things. I don’t know. So I tabled my ideas, and then we left without (my) saying anything.

(Community member)

In certain communities, participants described the challenge of holding regular meetings and making group decisions as members were coming and going due to travel for medical appointments or work-related events. This was in addition to regular family and community concerns or crises that they needed to deal with. A participant described these challenges in her own life: “The intentions here are always very good but sometimes you can’t help what’s going on in your personal life and it impacts if you can come to work or if you can’t.”

Another participant explained the challenges of involving other community members within mobilization projects. With this statement, we understand that some may not be emotionally available to participate in collective actions as they work on their own personal and family lives.

When you get in the South in those committees and everything, there’s always a few volunteers and then you try to break some arms in some kind of way in the North to get volunteers saying “Ah get involved” . . . Here, every door you open, there’s a crisis that a lot of people would not be able to process or to manage, like down South. But they’re still living. They’re still... You know? They’re trying to push their life going through.

(Community member)

Second, participants explained that community mobilization required a tremendous amount of time and skills that they often felt unprepared or unmotivated to undertake alone as many tasks associated with mobilization were described as being tedious or overwhelming, impeding the ability to carry a project through. As an example, within the region, two sources of funding are substantial enough to start a small community organization. One source requires completing a complex web-based form. One must feel comfortable navigating the web. Low bandwidth within communities increases the challenge of completing such forms. The other source of funding requires that the leading group of an initiative become a non-profit organization with a board of directors. Forms must be completed in French, an official language in Quebec. A challenge for the majority for whom Inuktitut remains their first language and English second. If the status is obtained, the group is left with an imposed hierarchical structure for their organization. In both cases, those who wish to obtain the funding must have access to a specific skill set in order to do so.

A third consideration was the perceived ability to participate in decision-making for one’s community. Participants spoke of how mobilization must start from community members and how they must take responsibility and ownership of their process. However, participants also recognized that years of oppression under a colonial system undermined many peoples’ confidence in their
ability to take on community roles. One individual
described entering a work environment with non-Inuit:

I was there for maybe 1 year, scared to say something
and my English was very bad...I think it’s because
Inuit used to be very low that day when Qallunaat
(non-Inuit) came the first day. They said yes, yes, yes,
to everything, even if they didn’t agree with the Qallu-
naat. It’s like everything. Qallunaat knows. They were
rich, they had everything. That’s what I think our par-
ents used to think. So they said “If your child doesn’t
go to school, they’re gonna take the family allowance
away from you. You won’t get that”. They used to be
scared of Qallunaat, they had to say yes to everything.

(Community member)

Other participants spoke of the fact that some might
judge themselves as parents and as community members
and not feel that they have the right or the knowledge
to take part in such community under-takings.

With the support of sivuliqtiktaaq (community lead-
ers), both appointed and informal, participants described
the importance of pigunautinivit (fighting for one’s
rights). They spoke of their experiences practicing
standing up for themselves and for the community as
they assumed roles and responsibilities within the com-
munity, developing sugnujutsiaq (a sense of confi-
dence). This process was poignantly captured in the words of
this individual who sought to remain active in light of
the destruction that colonial influences have had on the
community, advocating for a response in which persons
moved from a state of powerlessness to one of empow-
erment:

I said “Inuit people, you’re not going to be silent any-
more. We know our community, we’re the ones who
know. Not those people (Outsiders). They’re here for
helping us. So your silence stops. Say everything, what
you want to say when we have meetings”. Because we
were so silent for so many years.

(Community member)

Another participant encouraged community members to
feel confident in their knowledge and ways and promote
culture and language as a means of community wellbeing.
By doing so, they would slowly build a sense of empow-
erment and a clearer direction for their community pro-
jects.

Building a foundation through team work

Participants identified the importance of working as a
team for projects to be successful. They spoke of
challenges to team work within communities. Challenges
included (a) interpersonal dynamics, (b) impacts of inter-
generational trauma, and (c) complex relationships within
small community settings. Despite the challenges, partici-
pants identified (a) strategies that helped improve team-
work, (b) the importance of leadership, and (c) time for
trust building among partners.

In settings where leadership was identified as being
limited in a community, group meetings and organiza-
tional interactions sometimes resulted in frustrations or
dissatisfactions between members. Many felt uncomfort-
able speaking-up directly to someone. The pent-up frustra-
tion would amplify interpersonal tensions, which would
result in interpersonal distancing and, consequently, fewer
meetings. A participant talked about the dynamics that
take place in small group meetings where certain people
are seen as overbearing: “Usually when we see a person
being like that and being difficult, we try to walk away
and try not to connect with that person too much in the
future.” Another participant explained how this challenge
influenced group dynamics: “Like any other people in the
world, some people tend to attack, like putting other peo-
ple down. So that hinders or that discourages to speak
up.”

A participant explained that the problematic communi-
cation can be linked with experiences of individual and
collective trauma.

Residential schools, TB, unresolved traumas, we have
only started touching the surface of those traumas. We
haven’t dealt with that. If we aren’t guided to feel emo-
tionally safe we say I’m not worthy because of my
trauma. People say she or he is so mean, so angry, but
that is their protective wall, protecting from their
trauma. Being aggressive is a way to protect them-

(Community member)

Our community partners explained that speaking up
was very uncomfortable for a variety of reasons. First,
people hold complex networks of connections with col-
leagues also being members of family and friendship net-
works. Thus, speaking up in a professional setting may
threaten relationships in a personal setting. Second, many
mentioned not having the strength or confidence of speak-
their mind and feeling uncomfortable in situations of
conflict.

However, in communities where they had established
mechanisms to support communication, mobilization
would move forward more smoothly. These mechanisms
included regular debriefing sessions, ongoing training
related to group dynamics and functioning, and access to
a leader or an out-of-community support person to create
safe spaces for discussions or to release frustration. An individual described, for example, the role of community meetings in keeping paths of communication open:

Basic communication is strong between the people. And they are really transparent and they are not scared to speak the truth even if it is kind of sometimes «ouuf I don’t really want to hear it» but it must be heard and... but it’s because of our community meetings, it allows continuous flow of communicating amongst everybody.

(Community member)

An interviewee described the role of the leaders in these meetings, necessary to create a sense of safety and to move forward in a constructive fashion.

Yes, sometimes we have heated debates, but that’s normal, like this is how even more innovated ideas come out. When we have those kinds of heated debates and sometimes when they are crossing the line we say: «Ok, we are not gonna cross that line» and then like Tina and Lolly are really good at like bring back the focus: «Ok, this is what our goal is, this is what we are gonna try to do». Because sometimes people, they tend to bring their emotion so we say: «It is not an emotion thing... this is a solution-based approach that we are trying to do». We are starting to see that it’s happening but at the beginning it was like all emotions but we just kept going.

(Community member)

Leaders and strong community members are also required to offer a safe structure to deal with emotional traumas that might be triggered during group discussions or community meetings. One such leader explained her approach:

Let’s say a 60 year old is speaking and they are speaking, we can’t... we don’t say «Arrgh» we always take into consideration that they might be dealing with something emotionally because of a trauma, and so we delicately approach every situation and say... we do kind of like checking with the people. Yea, lot of communication to make sure that everything, everybody is ok. That’s what we do.

(Community member)

Strong leadership within the community was defined by participants as persons who are able to make decisions involving others, who rally people, and who offer support for collective and individual action. As one participant described:

Suzie is a real role model. She worked at a major institution for many years and just recently she left, thank goodness because we love having her. She is a real, like a real leader, and so we are very lucky to have had her, really, she doesn’t realize she’s mentored us.

(Community member)

It was essential that the group slowly build trust in each other and a steady foundation as a group before undertaking large projects. This trust could develop by trying out small initiatives, showing respect for the different perspectives of group members and having faith that when one has ideas and approaches that are different from our own, they may still be valuable contributions to the project. A participant described this process using a hunting metaphor: “when you go out hunting you try one way. You gently tap the ice, you see if the ice will break or not. You give it a try and if you see that it doesn’t work then you try another way. You have to trust that people will find a way.”

Judicious use of supports and resources coming from outside of communities

Participants spoke of the pertinence of working with non-Inuit individuals and organizations in order to help deal with many of the challenges related to community mobilization. Their perceived role varied between projects and communities and necessitated reflection on the part of local community organizers to determine when and how persons were to become involved. In one example, the participant related this request for input to a need for information:

So, it is like the whole community makes a plan and we say: «Ok, maybe we don’t have enough information on this» so, we ask people from the outside who are expert in that kind of field that we are trying to resolve and we ask them to come and do presentation to the community so that we are teaching ourselves to find the solution for ourselves so that we can make sure that we are developing and we are growing in a positive manner.

(Community member)

Another participant described the role that out-of-community consultants can play as neutral individuals facilitating dialogues and offering support:

Sometimes if we have somebody who is from the outside that came to present and then there was a question, sometimes we debrief with them and say: «Ok, what would be the best approach to kind of handle a situation like this».

(Community member)
Furthermore, non-Inuit served a role when community organizers were already burdened with existing tasks:

We sometimes need someone from the outside to start project. Like someone to put in their time, we do not always have the time, and we are working with our mandates, we are always working with the people, with their organizations like sometimes we don’t have enough time to work on these special projects.

(Community member)

A participant explained that despite having energy and motivation, people needed certain types of knowledge to make projects happen. Acquiring this knowledge takes time and mentors that will pass on the knowledge and remain involved in its implementation.

We have the gas but not the parts. We’re learning from life experiences. Life is not... it may not be a good teacher. I learned about that. Because when you get into something and you don’t know about it, you don’t know what to do with it and it can be very overwhelming. But if somebody passes information or you go into a course or something like that and it’s passed, then people know what to do and what it is.

(Community member)

Non-Inuit were often mentioned as having other roles in mobilization. This could include negotiating relationships with organizations, completing administrative tasks, and being a person to reflect with. In communities where leadership was more challenging, or where group dynamics were more complex, non-Inuit were seen as helpful in spear-heading a project during its inception, offering consistency and guidance with regard to how to proceed in a project.

However, a participant explained that at times people from outside of the community had difficulty seeing what Inuit were doing for their own families and communities, and have difficulty hearing and respecting other ways of doing. Similarly, a participant from another community explained that as Inuit, they tried to find a middle ground where they could work with external organizations all the meanwhile respecting their own ways of being. However, as she explained, this search for the middle ground was difficult to attain and impacted the ability of the younger generation to take on these tasks for mobilization and community development:

We haven’t found the middle yet. Its an ongoing search and meanwhile we are losing a lot of youth who are quitting because of all the expectations. Its an environment that makes you doubt.

(Community member)

Participants felt that out-of-community support agents needed to truly listen to the community needs and adapt to the rhythm of local mobilization efforts so as to not create feelings of disempowerment, a challenge for many whose timelines were based on personal and professional agendas or mandates.

Sapilitailirit: Individual and collective attitudes of persistence and determination

Perhaps most important in our ethnographic work and in the interviews was the omnipresent value of Sapilitailirit “not giving up.” We noticed that no matter what community, or what project participants spoke of, and no matter how strong or challenged the leadership was within a community, people persisted in the face of challenge. At times, this meant engaging in actions to move forward, whereas at other times, it meant stepping back. People adapted, taking on new roles and inviting new perspectives. This determination eventually led to a redefinition and transformation of projects and community members became increasingly invested. As one community member explained:

I said: «It needs to start from us» and so it took us five years to really speak to the community because if you are going to want to bring change you have to have your people believe in it. So it took us five years to really put in their mind to say that they are capable of bringing change to their own people. So, this is one of the success stories.

(Community member)

As he continued, he described the level of persistence required to accomplish their vision and to engage the community:

Everybody kept saying «Impossible, no, impossible» but we just kept going, kept going, kept going, kept going, talking, kept talking, kept talking, and so everybody said: «Let’s just try it» because that’s what it requires. We were relentless. We took time, and then people started to really believe and say: «Yes we support you, we support you».

(Community member)

A participant described the fundamental beliefs that keep her believing in her work and the potential to transform her community through the next generations:

Working with families it’s going to instill, give back the power to the people so that they can start giving back the power to their kids, that strength that is still
there, and it was... we just have to make sure that our people believe that, they are that strong.

(Community member)

Coming back to the hunting metaphor, a participant explained that when one goes out hunting, they may not find food the first day, nor the second. However, they will return home and try another path confident that they will find food to support their family and their community. This metaphor speaks to the adaptability and determination required to attain one’s goal.

Discussion

In an era where policy analysts, administrators and frontline workers increasingly recognize the importance of adapting and, at times transforming health, education and municipal services for Inuit (ITK, 2016; Lehti, Niemelä, Hoven, Mandell, & Sourander, 2009), a deeper understanding of community experiences and of the sociopolitical context within which mobilization efforts are taking place is imperative. The experiences described by the participants suggest that the processes toward community empowerment and community development of services take place in a setting that is heavily impacted by two broad factors: sociogeographical context and coloniality. These realities are simultaneously a motor for change and challenges to community mobilization. Community members see and experience social issues in their daily lives which ignite and reinforce a desire to support the wellbeing of their families, friends as well as that of the next generations. This has been observed in other Indigenous communities across Canada where sociopolitical and cultural issues affecting their communities are a motivation to support collective wellbeing despite the challenges (Wesley-Esquimaux & Calliou, 2010).

Sociogeographical realities

In northern Canada, communities are a relatively new social structure and have transformed since the 1950s–1960s (Kral, Salusky, Inuksuk, Angutimarik, & Tulugardjuk, 2014). Before this period, people lived nomadic lives in small family structures. Still today, communities are not connected by road. One must travel by plane to go from one community to another. Therefore, a community project will only be able to benefit from the human resources within the specific community. Moreover, people living within the small communities ranging from 230 to 2,700 people are connected through diverse social ties meaning that people entertain long-standing and multilayered relationships (friendship, kinship, work relationships, and other forms of relationships). Very little literature has explored the impact of being a small community on the process of community development and mobilization. Work conducted by Richmond and Ross (2008) suggests that while social networks are essential for Indigenous health and wellbeing yet in northern communities, they are also a tremendous source of exhaustion and dependency. A small body of literature suggests that Indigenous peoples taking leadership roles in such contexts must deal with high levels of social pressure and tend to accumulate multiple projects, often times leading to exhaustion (McEwan, Crouch, Robertson, & Fagan, 2013; Wesley-Esquimaux & Calliou, 2010). A parallel literature in the field of social psychology suggests that in small communities where socioeconomic needs are elevated, relationships can be particularly strenuous due to interdependency between its members (Belle, 1983). When expectations and social performance are high and the needs are great, people can “therapeutically withdraw” from these social networks as a means of reducing stress, limiting even more the pool of available human resources to participate and sustain mobilization. These are but a few of the community realities that directly impact the availability of people, the nature of human interactions within communities, and the challenges of working together toward a common goal.

Moreover, sociogeographical realities also influence the nature of engagement of out-of-community agents supporting community projects. Staff turnover is high, and people working for funding organizations may fly in and out of communities for a few days or a week at a time influencing the nature of relationships and the work rhythms imposed on community members. Indeed, from our experience, community partners mentioned time and again how everything was accelerated when out-of-community agents were present. Community agents would feel the pressure of having to complete a mandate within a given time to ensure that the expenses related to travel were well worth the trip. Such agents often play a double role of adapting to community needs and responding to organizational expectations (Eversole, 2015).

Coloniality

The second factor we wish to discuss is the impact of colonization and perhaps most importantly of coloniality (Quijano, 2007). Trout, McEachern, Mullany, White, and Wexler (2018b) described coloniality “as social logic parallel to the historical events of colonization predicated on the disruption of Indigenous people’s ability to shape their worlds, including their health and wellbeing.” Coloniality is the process by which a form of knowledge and way of doing is imposed, sometimes subtly effacing or eradicating other forms of knowledge. A variety of social,
political, legal, and relational pressures will prompt a group of people to take on certain roles and ways of doing (Quijano, 2007). Describing colonialism in Latin American Quijano (2007) explains: “Beyond repression, the main instrument of all power is its seduction. Cultural Europeanization was transformed into an aspiration. It was a way of participating and later to reach the same material benefits and the same power as the Europeans.”

In this study, coloniality shows its mark in a variety of ways. First, participants describe how decades of interactions with non-Inuit (Qallunaat) have led many to develop an unworthy sense of self, a feeling that one is “not good enough” and therefore should not speak up or participate in social development. This process is internalized and reinforced in social relations through lateral violence where community members might belittle others in overt and subtler ways. A person experiencing a vulnerable sense of self is reinforced in their beliefs when confronted with lateral violence, or in situations where he/she is meant to feel that their knowledge is not “sufficient enough” (Bombay, 2014; Clark, Augoustinos, & Malin, 2016). These situations threaten possibilities of personal and collective empowerment. This has been described in other communities that have experienced colonization (Berliner, Larsen, & de Casas Soberon, 2011).

Another way by which coloniality is perpetuated is via the numerous tasks and expectations that come with funding and other institutional structures surrounding mobilization. In communities where participants spoke very positively about their mobilization efforts, they seemed to position themselves as decision-makers of projects, and invited external support, all the meanwhile orchestrating the nature of the support received. In these communities, local members felt able to take on different tasks and navigate the Western-based systems. It is not surprising to hear participants from other communities speak of their desire to see youth learn to navigate two worlds, the Western world and the Inuit ways (Trout, Wexler, & Moses, 2018a; Waddell, Robinson, & Crawford, 2017; Wesley-Esquimaux & Calliou, 2010). This desire reveals an inherent paradox. In order to support community mobilization and Inuit approaches to wellbeing, people must master the knowledge of non-Inuit systems that will allow access to funding, legal status, and more, thus highlighting the power imbalances between knowledges. Noble (2015) speaks of an administrative colonialism. Again this is not unique to northern Canada. The critical literature on community development has demonstrated how despite the expressed desire to go against the top-down approaches and to “do differently” (Reinert, 2006), organization supporting mobilization tend to “focus on outcomes and requirements frequently established by those with power outside the community and social context” (Turner, 2009).

Moving forward
Participants spoke of various challenges; however, they described these challenges as stepping stones within a journey toward empowerment and community wellbeing. They spoke of a variety of ways in which they and their colleagues have been able to create safe spaces that allow them to continue moving forward and to “have big dreams” (Calliou, 2005-2006). They spoke with pride of their ability and that of their friends and colleagues to not give up. They spoke of the importance of caring for oneself by having key people to share with. They spoke of focusing on the positive moments and the moments of hope and pride. This ability to see beyond the challenges is a characteristic of leadership and of resilience as defined in publications by Indigenous and more specifically Inuit (Wesley-Esquimaux & Calliou, 2010).

Participants spoke of the importance of respecting and listening to the needs and experiences of a diversity of people. This means recognizing the uniqueness of each community member (Arnaquq, 2015) and acknowledging that people may have different ideas of how to move forward. A participant explained that these different ideas must be heard and tried out without judgment. Listening and learning from diversity and recognizing diversity within groups are fundamental components of community-based research and capacity building (Liberato, Brimblecombe, Ritchie, Ferguson, & Coveney, 2011; Trout et al., 2018b).

In order to create such spaces, participants spoke of the role of leadership. Leadership has been described as a central ingredient for community mobilization (Liberato et al., 2011). In this study, leadership could be demonstrated by mayors and other individuals with formal positions within institutions. However, the qualities of leadership were understood as something that can, and should, be encouraged among all community members. Building on traditional notions of leadership elders have explained that a person’s leadership should be identified by others based on their skills as demonstrated over time. Each member of a community had the ability and responsibility to recognize the leadership potential and skills of fellow community members (Preston, Claypool, Rowluck, & Green, 2015).

Leadership is demonstrated in a variety of ways including trusting that one can fight for their own rights: pigunavitànitvit; promoting and building trust in cultural ways of knowing and doing (Leon, 2012; Preston et al., 2015; Waddell et al., 2017), respecting and listening to others; and supporting others in developing their own leadership (Wesley-Esquimaux & Calliou, 2010). Supporting this personal strength and confidence in oneself and in one’s culture allows for people to come together and courageously share their thoughts and build a collective foundation to work as
This means blocking out negative attitudes and working on communication difficulties (Berliner et al., 2011). Participants of this study and of past studies suggest that working as a team can involve both Inuit and non-Inuit members as long as the process is respectful of Inuit values and ways of governance (Waddell et al., 2017).

Foundational to this entire process is the value of persevering, not giving up, remaining hopeful (Niriuinniq) (Kirmayer, Dandeneau, Marshall, Kahanonni Phillips, & Jessen Williams, 2011; Kirmayer, Sehdev, Whitley, Dandeneau, & Isaac, 2009), and being resourceful (Qanuttuurniq) (McGregor, 2012). This resonates with values of resilience, survival, and adaptation (Kirmayer et al., 2011; McGregor, 2012; Tagalik, 2010; Trout et al., 2018a). In an interview, elder Louisa Cookie Brown (2016) explains the value of faith in Inuit culture and how the process of community mobilization within her community can be nurtured by faith and how faith can be nurtured by mobilization:

We were also always told you have to have faith. If you were going to go hunting, you have to have faith that you are protected. If animals are coming to attack, there is a strong force that will protect you. You have to have faith that your husband, who is out for a month, will come back with food. So in this mobilization process we have the opportunity now to talk about faith to show them to share.

Limitations

The study was meant as a starting point to reflect on the challenges and strengths experienced by people participating in community mobilization in the region of Nunavik. It is important to note that only twelve individual and two small group interviews were conducted. These interviews were supplemented by the thoughts and experiences of two Inuit co-authors also active in mobilization. Interviews were all conducted with people involved in mobilization at the time of the interviews; therefore, the data were not the experiences of those who may have tried projects and stepped away from them, or people who may not feel invited to participate in community mobilization.

Although interviews were co-conducted with an Inuit partner, they were all held primarily in English due to the presence of a non-Inuit researcher. We believe that this creates a gap between on the one hand, participants’ experiences and the meaning they give to experience, and on the other hand, what can be captured and related in English spoken language and written text. From our field work, we have observed that language, thoughts, and experiences are highly intertwined. It has been generally very difficult for our Inuit partners to translate words from Inuktitut to English and vice versa as the meaning of words are encapsulated within the languages. We also became conscious of the limitations of English interviews when reflecting on ways to share the documented knowledge with other community members starting mobilization. This dilemma is illustrative of the community mobilization process itself, where cultural meaning and norms are lost in translation, thus affecting the initiatives taken.

Conclusion

With growing support for community mobilization in northern Quebec and in Indigenous communities across Canada, it seems elemental to acknowledge that in these processes toward decolonization, “starting from scratch” with no external influences is not necessarily possible at the current time. Mobilization is surrounded by institutions, organizations, and individuals with varying adaptive capacities. These individuals are necessarily influenced by certain types of knowledge. Their institutions have access to the resources that allow for sustainability of collective mobilization (Craig & Porter, 1997; Eversole, 2015).

Participants of this study seem to feel that their process of decolonization involves recognizing the power differences and learning the ways of these institutions in order to master the expected skill sets and take ownership of the process of community mobilization. Participants speak of reconnecting and giving value to culture and language, but also giving value to oneself. This is precisely where the tension lies. The structures in place that are meant to support mobilization also come with expectations and modes of doing that can reduce one’s confidence and alienate community members from mobilization. The voices of our participants remind us that the challenges, despite being at times overwhelming, can also be motivators to move forward and adapt. Most fundamental to the process is the value of not letting go, of remaining hopeful that solutions will be found, and trying multiple paths to attain a collective vision.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.
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Compliance with Ethical Standards

The authors of this manuscript have complied with APA ethical principles in their treatment of individuals participating in the research, program, or policy described in the manuscript. The research has been approved by the CERAS, Comité d’Éthique de la Recherche en Arts et en Science of the University of Montreal.

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