

UQAUSIVUT: Our Language – Implementing Made-in-Nunavut Language Legislation

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Abstract

The protection and promotion of Inuit culture was identified as one of the most important goals for the creation of Nunavut, and language is one of the most important elements of Inuit culture. In 2008, Nunavut adopted a groundbreaking language legislative package to protect the Inuit language in the most significant way. In order to respond to the pressures confronting the Inuit language, and to ensure that its quality and prevalence are protected and promoted, the Government of Nunavut presented in 2012 Uqausivut, a comprehensive plan to coordinate a number of government language programs and services. This article provides an overview of Nunavut's new language policy framework, and how the territorial government intends to take positive action to protect, revitalize and promote the Inuit Language across the Territory.

Résumé

La protection et la promotion de la culture inuite ont été identifiées comme parmi les plus importants objectifs pour la création du Nunavut, et la langue est un des éléments les plus importants de la culture inuite. En 2008, le Nunavut a adopté un ensemble innovateur de mesures législatives pour protéger la langue inuite d'une façon fondamentale. Afin de répondre aux pressions qui confrontent la langue inuite, et pour assurer que sa qualité et sa prévalence soient protégées et favorisées, le Gouvernement du Nunavut a présenté en 2012 Uqausivut, un plan global pour coordonner plusieurs programmes et services de langue gouvernementaux. Cet article fournit un aperçu du nouveau cadre stratégique de langue au Nunavut et détaille comment le gouvernement territorial a l'intention d'implémenter des mesures concrètes pour protéger, revitaliser et promouvoir la langue inuite partout dans le territoire.

The Uqausivut Plan

The Government of Nunavut made a commitment to implement Nunavut's new language legislation by ensuring its spirit and intent are reflected in government policies, programs and services.

The *Official Languages Act* defines specific obligations of territorial government institutions to ensure they communicate with and serve members of the public in the official language of their choice: the Inuit Language ("Inuktitut"), English or French. It also deals with the use of official languages in the proceedings of the Legislative Assembly of Nunavut and the Courts.

While respecting the equality of the official languages, the *Inuit Language Protection Act* gives Inuktitut new prominence in education, work and daily life throughout the Territory, and sets out measures by which governments and private sector organizations can take positive action to protect, revitalize and promote its use.

Under the *Official Languages Act* and the *Inuit Language Protection Act*, the Minister of Languages is tasked with developing and maintaining a comprehensive plan to coordinate the implementation of the language legislation by departments of the Government of Nunavut and public agencies.

On June 9, 2011, the Minister of Languages tabled a proposed comprehensive implementation plan (the "proposed Uqausivut Plan") to allow Nunavummiut to review and comment on its content. The Government received and reviewed 35 submissions from individuals and stakeholders, including the Languages

Commissioner, Regional Inuit Associations, Francophone organizations, businesses, municipalities and others.

To develop the final version of the Uqausivut Plan, the Government of Nunavut consulted Nunavut Tunngavik Inc. ("NTI"), the Designated Inuit Organization, in accordance with Article 32 of the *Nunavut Land Claims Agreement*. The Department of Culture and Heritage established a meaningful collaboration with NTI by creating a joint steering committee, under the guidance of the Languages Commissioner, to develop this plan for the effective implementation of language obligations pursuant to both Acts.

The Government of Nunavut will continue to consult with territorial institutions, municipalities, Francophones, Anglophones and other interested bodies regarding their specific concerns during the implementation, monitoring and evaluation of the results of the Plan.

The Uqausivut Plan identifies implementation measures through which departments of the Government of Nunavut and public agencies will meet their obligations under the language legislation. The first section of the Plan outlines obligations, responsibilities and priorities for implementing the various components of the *Official Languages Act*; the second section provides the same outline for the *Inuit Language Protection Act*. The third and last section presents a management and accountability framework, and describes how the Plan will be resourced.

The Official languages Act

When Nunavut was created in 1999, it inherited the Northwest Territories *Official Languages Act*. The Act provides for full equality between English and French, and recognized a lesser set of rights to seven Aboriginal languages, including Inuktitut¹. This did not reflect the realities of Nunavut, where a majority of people speak neither English nor French as their first language, but a single Aboriginal language.

On June 4, 2008, Nunavut's new *Official Languages Act* was approved by Nunavut's Legislative Assembly and received concurrence from the Federal Parliament on June 11, 2009. The new Act establishes the Inuit Language ("Inuktitut"), English and French as Nunavut's three Official Languages. The new Act came into force on April 1st, 2013, and maintains and enhances all the rights and privileges of English and French speakers, in accordance with the federal *Nunavut Act*, while raising Inuktitut to equal status.

The new Act recognizes that Inuktitut is the spoken and preferred language of a majority of Nunavummiut, and provides Inuit in Nunavut with a clear statement of their inherent right to the use of Inuktitut in full equality with English and French. It also affirms that positive action is necessary to protect and promote Inuktitut and Inuit cultural expression. The Act represents a significant change from previous language legislation in the territories, and is unprecedented in Canada.

Official Languages in Nunavut

In 2006, Nunavut had a population of 29,325 people spread over 25 communities. The Territory covers 1.994 million square kilometres of land mass, and stretches over three time zones. There are no roads connecting the Territory with the rest of the country or linking its communities. Most goods and people must be flown in by plane or by ship during the short summer season. This adds considerably to the cost of living in the Territory.

According to 2006 census data, Inuit formed 84% of Nunavut's population with 24,635 people, and represented the majority of residents in all communities. About 280 people reported another Aboriginal identity, and 4,410 reported non-Aboriginal identity.

The Government of Nunavut, under Article 23 of the *Nunavut Land Claims Agreement*, has an obligation to achieve a workforce representative of the population across all employment categories. In June 2011, the overall level of Inuit representation within the public service was 51% (c.f., *2012-2015 Government of Nunavut Business Plan*).

In terms of official language use, about 71% of the territorial population reported Inuktitut as their mother

tongue in 2006, while 55% identified it as the main language used in the home and 79% were able to use it in normal conversation.

About 28% reported English as their mother tongue, while about 45% said it was the language they "mostly or only" spoke at home. About 88% of the territorial population reported they were able to speak it.

The census data indicated that about 1.4% of the territorial population reported French as their mother tongue, while 0.7% used it most often at home, and 4% were able to speak both English and French. Most Francophones in the Territory live in Iqaluit.

These geographic, economic and demographic factors are important to consider for the development and delivery of government programs and services in the Territory.

The Inuit Language Protection Act

The protection and promotion of Inuit culture was identified as one of the most important goals for the creation of Nunavut, and language is one of the most important elements of Inuit culture.

While respecting the equality of Official Languages, the *Inuit Language Protection Act* was designed specifically to ensure respect for unilingual Inuit, particularly Elders, to reverse language shift among youth, and to strengthen the use of Inuktitut among all Nunavummiut. The Act was unanimously approved by the Members of the Legislative Assembly of Nunavut in September 2008, and is now law in Nunavut.

As one of Canada's founding languages, Inuktitut is also an irreplaceable part of the national heritage, and contributes to the richness and diversity of life in this country. Canada recognized this fact, and the need to protect and support Inuktitut, when it signed the *Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions* in 2005, and, more recently, when it endorsed the *United Nations Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* in November 2010.

In order to respond to the pressures confronting Inuktitut, and to ensure that its quality and prevalence are protected and promoted in Nunavut, this section of the Plan identifies the implementation methods that departments of the Government of Nunavut and public agencies will employ in order to advance Inuktitut:

- **As a language of education**, by providing children with lifelong oral and writing skills through a bilingual learning environment, enabling them to enter adult life as world citizens and participate in the day-to-day life, development and cultural vibrancy of their communities and homeland;
- **As a language of work in territorial institutions**, by supporting Inuit employment within the territorial public service to a representative level, and the advancement and participation of Inuit in

¹ Under the NWT Official Languages Act (1988), Inuktitut includes Inuinnaqtun.

the economic opportunities and development of Nunavut;

- **As a language in the day-to-day services** provided by governments, municipalities, and private sector bodies to the general public in Nunavut.

Implementation will also support the use of Inuktitut in pre-school and adult education, and include special measures to revitalize and promote its use among youth and in communities where there are concerns of language loss or assimilation.

The vitality of Inuktitut in Nunavut²

The 2006 Canadian census data shows that Inuktitut is one of the three Aboriginal languages in Canada with enough speakers to have a good chance for survival. However, the data presents some very disturbing trends.

Figure 1 reflects what Nunavummiut have known for a long time: over a period of ten years, the percentage of Inuit who report knowledge of their language, who name Inuktitut as their mother tongue, and who speak the language in their homes has dropped.

The decline in the number of people who speak mainly Inuktitut in their homes is particularly worrisome. Home is the most important environment for the transfer of a language from one generation to another. If enough households stop using Inuktitut in the home, there will not be enough mother tongue speakers to sustain the language into the future.

Inuit youth are beginning to feel that cultural gap. English dominates many aspects of contemporary society in Nunavut. Inuit youth are increasingly concerned about hearing and speaking more English and losing their ability to speak Inuktitut. They have expressed the need for support for their language through family, community and education.

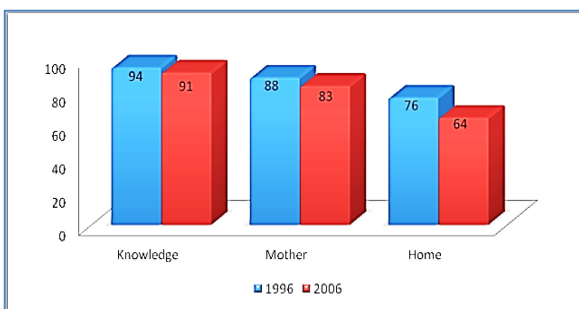


Figure 1 Inuit identity with mother tongue and home language, Nunavut, 1996-2006

² Except as directed by the Inuit Uqausinginnik Taiguusiliuqtiit, the Inuit Language is defined in the Act as Inuinnaqtun in or near Kugluktuk, Cambridge Bay, Bathurst Inlet and Umingmaktuug; Inuktitut in or near all other communities; or both, as prescribed by regulations. The term “Inuktitut” is used interchangeably with the term “Inuit Language” throughout this document, unless a regional variant is specified.

The vitality of Inuktitut varies considerably by region, as illustrated in the chart below. A language strategy prepared by the Kitikmeot Inuit Association estimates that language revitalization in the region may take between 20 to 40 years if concerted action is taken immediately in homes, communities and schools. There are also concerns about language loss in other communities across Nunavut, particularly in Rankin Inlet, Baker Lake, Chesterfield Inlet, Iqaluit, and Resolute Bay.

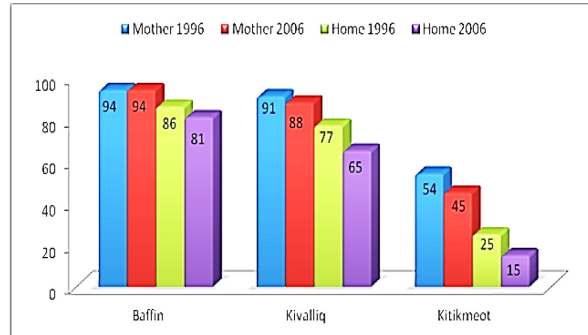


Figure 2 Inuit Identity with mother tongue and home language, by Nunavut region, 1996-2006

Social exclusion and access to services are also long-standing concerns. These include access to federal, territorial, municipal and business services delivered in Nunavut. To date, unilingual Inuit, particularly Elders, report feeling disadvantaged in their homeland. Because of language barriers, they often do not have equal access to important and basic services that other Canadians enjoy in either English or French.

Past government actions and policies, such as compulsory relocation of Inuit to residential schools, have had a persistent negative and destructive impact on Inuit identity, culture and language. The Canadian Prime Minister’s apology in June 2008 was a welcome step to begin the healing process, but much must still be done to truly address the disadvantages and discrimination faced by those for whom Inuktitut is the first, only or preferred language.

Management and accountability

The Acts assign responsibility for different aspects of implementation, development, and enforcement to different bodies. Of importance are the responsibilities assigned to these bodies:

- The Minister of Languages is responsible for coordinating the implementation, management, monitoring and evaluation of the legislation by departments of the Government of Nunavut and public agencies. The Minister is also mandated to promote the equality of Official Languages in Nunavut, and to create policies or programs to support the revitalization of Inuktitut in areas of need.
- The Inuit Uqausinginnik Taiguusiliuqtiit is an independent body of language experts mandated to develop and standardize terminology and

orthography for the modern use of Inuktitut in government and business.

- The Office of the Languages Commissioner has an expanded role in the investigation of concerns about language services both in the public and private sectors, and in finding innovative solutions and, if necessary, seeking remedies for serious violations of the Acts through the Nunavut Court of Justice.

Resourcing the Plan

The Government of Nunavut has made important investments and will continue to invest in the development and implementation of programs and services to meet its language obligations. The guiding principle of *Qanuqturniq* will also be promoted to encourage departments and public agencies to be innovative and resourceful, and to make the most of the available government resources in undertaking the implementation of their language obligations.

To assist departments and public agencies in meeting their language obligations, the Government of Nunavut has established a \$5 million dollars Inuit Language Implementation Fund to pay for government-wide programs and services in Inuktitut. The Fund will be primarily used to build capacity among departments and public agencies, with the expectations that programs and services in Inuktitut will become a normal and regular part of their operations and planned for.

In addition, the Department of Culture and Heritage will continue to administer the *Canada-Nunavut General Agreement for the Promotion of the French and Inuit Languages*. Over the last decade, Canada has provided approximately \$1.45 million annually to pay for programs and services delivered in French by departments and public agencies, and support the development of the Francophone community. The federal government has provided a further \$1.1 million dollars annually, primarily to support community-based Inuit Language initiatives.

The Government of Canada is and will remain an important partner for the implementation of Nunavut's language legislation. The Government of Nunavut, along with its partners, will advocate for a new Nunavut-specific language funding agreement between Nunavut and Canada. We will seek "adequate and sustained" federal funding for the continued protection and promotion of Official Languages in the Territory, consistent with Nunavut's legal obligations³, particularly with respect to French and Inuktitut.

³ The Senate of Canada endorsed this view when it gave concurrence to Nunavut's new Official Languages Act on June 11, 2009: "That, in light of Parliament's decision to concur in the passage of the Official Languages Act by the Legislative Assembly of Nunavut, the Government of Canada make adequate and sustained funding available to the Government of Nunavut for the continued protection and promotion of official

languages in the territory, as is consistent with the Government's legal obligations." Recommendation issued by the Standing Senate Committee on Legal and Constitutional Affairs in its final report entitled: *Language Rights in Canada's North: Nunavut's New Official Languages Act*.