

**Brief from the
Conseil central du Montréal métropolitain - CSN
on housing in Nunavik
submitted to the
FRAPRU roving commission on housing**

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Kuujjuaq

And perhaps the time has come to finally take into consideration the life style of the Inuit and stop imposing that of non-Aboriginals on them. They were nomads and we made them settle down; they preferred collective ownership and we made them believe that private was more natural; they carried out their traditional activities and we tried to force them into the mould of modernity; they had their own way of meeting each person's needs and we turned their brains to trades that don't make much sense in the world as they imagine it... So it's hardly surprising that the overall result is so poor. Who's fault is that...?

Priscilla Bittar

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Foreword

The Conseil central du Montréal métropolitain-CSN is a union organization composed of more than 400 unions representing 94,000 members, in all sectors of work. Our ranks include women and men who work in health care and social services, education, manufacturing, factories, stores, offices, media, government agencies and the construction industry. Our territory covers the islands of Montréal and Laval, and Nunavik and James Bay in Québec's Far North.

The central council is an important player in the labour movement, fighting for better living and working conditions for its members. Part of its mandate is to publicize and win recognition for the demands of members of its affiliated unions, as well as to represent them on matters affecting them as citizens.

In 2010, we helped found the Coalition pour les droits des peuples autochtones (Coalition for Aboriginal peoples' rights) as a form of support for Aboriginal peoples in their efforts to enforce the terms of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples in all projects, all practices and all decisions affecting them.

We salute the existence of the roving commission on housing in Québec set up by the FRAPRU, as well as the fact that it is holding its first hearings in Nunavik, a land forgotten and abandoned if ever there was one. The political class, and especially the federal and provincial governments, must resolve the terrible situation in the Far North regarding the tragic lack of available housing.

Housing crisis in Nunavik: action is urgently needed

As the CCMM submits its brief to the FRAPRU's roving commission on housing, it is haunted by the urgency of the situation. Human dignity has been battered and eroded for years in Nunavik, in part because of an unprecedented housing crisis. Overcrowded housing gives rise to numerous social problems that jeopardize the development and flourishing of individuals and communities in Québec's Far North.

Almost half of the housing in the Far North is overcrowded.¹ It is not uncommon to see a two-bedroom unit housing a father, mother, two or three teenagers and an adopted child!² There can be up to fifteen people in a single unit, with at most six bedrooms. Fifteen people in six bedrooms... if you're lucky!

Yet a roof over one's head is a fundamental human right, entrenched in the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*:

*Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, **housing** and medical care and necessary social services, and the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his control. (Article 25(1))*

This article must be given the broadest possible interpretation, meaning that it is not enough to have a roof over one's head; housing conditions must make it possible for other human rights to become a tangible reality in fields as vast as education, physical and psychological health, safety and security, etc. Canadian governments at all levels must therefore take the necessary steps to ensure that these fundamental rights are exercised in practice in the territory of Nunavik.

To start with, the central council asserts that what the Inuit communities want must be central in solving the housing crisis. The solutions adopted must necessarily be in keeping with what the Inuit themselves want to see done, as underscored in the Plan Nunavik.³

¹ Kativik Municipal Housing Bureau: 2010 Housing Needs Survey for Social Housing Units Managed by the Kativik Municipal Housing Bureau, May 2010, page 10

² Inuit traditional customary adoption

³ The Plan Nunavik (Parnasimautik) proposes a vision of development and priorities for Nunavik over a 25-year span in fields such as housing, health, education, access to the land, environmental and wildlife protection, culture, tourism, bio-food, non-renewable resources, energy transportation, communications and community development. Parnasimautik was drawn up in 2010 by the Makivik Corporation and the Kativik Regional Government in collaboration with the Nunavik Regional Board of Health and Social Services, the Kativik School Board, the Avataq Cultural Institute, the Nunavik Mineral Exploration Fund and the Nunavik Tourism Association. Parnasimautik is intended as a response to the Québec government's Plan Nord project and will play a central role in discussions among Nunavimmiut on the orientation that regional development must take. <http://www.makivik.org/building-nunavik/plan-nunavik/>

The problems due to overcrowded housing are numerous. First of all, there are practical considerations such as more rapid wear-and-tear on housing because of the climate, which has an immediate impact on people's living conditions, and the calibration of the amount of water distributed to each house is inefficient because it is calculated on the basis of a single family. Since housing units are shared by several families, there is a scandalous shortage of this vital resource. Remember, in Nunavik water is distributed by means of tank trucks that fill home water tanks.

More generally, it is important to gauge the social ramifications of the housing shortage. Many families live in situations that are not conducive to their development. How can someone find a quiet corner to study or do homework in an overcrowded flat? How can family ties be built and consolidated around a meal when there is no room in the house big enough to hold the entire family? How can tensions among family members be ignored when the lack of space erodes people's patience and heightens their anger? How can the violence and abuse of all kinds spawned by such close quarters be avoided? What choice does a woman have but to go back to an aggressive spouse when there is nowhere else to go because of the dire housing shortage? What choice does a 10-year-old have but to stay out on the street because he is afraid of the adults at home under the influence of alcohol, and there is no other place to go, given that a majority of families live in potentially violent homes?

The Commission des droits de la personne et des droits de la jeunesse has already examined the housing crisis in Nunavik. In its press release when it issued its follow-up report on youth protection services in Nunavik, the Commission said: *"The Commission remains very concerned, however, about overcrowded housing, a major problem that exacerbates social problems like the use of drugs and alcohol, suicide and family violence."*

The housing shortage and overcrowding have an impact on people's health. The Plan Nunavik is eloquent in this regard, and it is no exaggeration to say that overcrowding is a fertile hypocaust for the spread of contagious disease and repeated respiratory infections. To illustrate this point, it can be noted that tuberculosis rates are now similar to those in developing countries. In an article in the June 17, 2012 issue of *Le Soleil*, Camil Bouchard wrote on behalf of the Collectif de chercheurs et d'intervenants pour les enfants autochtones: *"Public health workers are fighting factors in Inuit family environments that threaten to propagate the bacillus – the tuberculosis bacillus – mainly notoriously overcrowded housing."*⁴ Finally, the correlation between overcrowding and deteriorating mental health has also been demonstrated and should not be ignored, since psychological problems stemming from overcrowding and the lack of privacy can lead to suicide.

Inuit children are the primary victims of the tragic housing situation in Nunavik. A text signed by a collective of authors⁵ in the April 1, 2011 issue of *Le Devoir* outlines

⁴ <http://www.lapresse.ca/le-soleil/opinions/points-de-vue/201206/14/01-4534892-la-tuberculose-revient-hanter-le-nunavik.php>

⁵ Signed by: Camil Bouchard, Delphine Collin-Vézina, Chantal Lavergne, Sonia Hélie, Jacinthe Dion, Gérard Duhaime, Marie-Claude Larrivée, Francine Lavoie, Nathalie Morin, Michel Tousignant, André Lebon

how they are more vulnerable to hazards stemming from the lack of housing: infections, lung diseases, distress, ill-treatment and behavioural and learning problems. The authors accuse governments of knowing about it and doing nothing. They conclude with the ironic comment, "*There is a shortage of 1,000 housing units for families in Nunavik, but of course there's the Colisée arena in Québec City...*"

We would add that Canadian and Québec governments make budget choices that are beyond the control of long-standing communities, and on which they are not even consulted. The list of these unacceptable budget choices goes on and on. The unbearable, intolerable housing crisis in northern communities in Québec reminds us that in the name of human dignity, it is urgent to devote the funding necessary to the quality of life of these peoples, not their destruction.

Recommendation 1

That the Canadian and Québec governments take immediate, massive steps to build as many housing units as are needed to end overcrowding in housing in Nunavik's Inuit communities as soon as possible.

Recommendation 2

That the Canadian and Québec governments invest on an on-going basis the amounts needed to adjust the housing supply to the demographic growth and evolution of the population in Nunavik communities to ensure that overcrowding never occurs again in these communities.

Housing crisis in the North - homelessness in the South

The housing crisis and its harmful ramifications (violence, sexual abuse, drug addiction, suicide, family and conjugal problems...) also drive Inuit to gamble on fleeing the overcrowding in the North, hoping to find a better life by leaving their community for urban centres like Montréal. It's a risky move that all too often leaves the most vulnerable homeless in the big city. For example, every evening about 40 people from these communities get ready to spend the night at *Projet autochtone Québec*, the dedicated shelter for them on De la Gauchetière. Many more of them sleep outdoors or share a room in a rooming house when they can afford one.

For many reasons, Inuit in Montréal are all too often confronted with homelessness or jail – two life trajectories in which they are over-represented. The abandonment of their traditional way of life, a lack of understanding of the South's cultural codes, a non-correlation between what's available in the labour market and their social and

job skills, and finally the racism to which they are subjected in the city (in both housing and employment) are all factors that compromise their successful integration in the urban world and disqualify them from achieving a better life. And if they wind up wanting to go back to the North after their misadventures in town, they then run into rejection from members of their community....

Yet everything suggests that this North-South migration is accelerating, with all the social issues that this raises if the social marginalization of these migrants is to be avoided. Montréal caseworkers in the field of homelessness in Montréal have seen a growing number of homeless Inuit and First Nations people in recent years.

What is more, many observers anticipate that the implementation of the Plan Nord is likely to aggravate the disintegration of Aboriginal communities in the North, further adding to the number of people converging on Montréal who are in danger of winding up homeless. Consequently, it is also becoming indispensable to consolidate the operations of *Projet Autochtone Québec*, the only shelter designed specifically for Aboriginal people in Montréal, frequented by homeless Aboriginals. As well, in addition to massive investments in housing construction in the North, it is imperative to prevent any growth in homelessness among people from these communities in the South. It's a simple matter of respect for Aboriginal peoples.

Inuit women are the most vulnerable of these migrants from the North. *"Although women account for 22.8% of the homeless in Montréal, Aboriginal women account for half of the homeless Aboriginal population."* (Native Friendship Centre of Montreal, 2002)⁶ They are often fleeing conjugal violence and a wretched social situation. Many of them don't speak French or English. Many have addiction problems, are extremely poor and socially isolated and wind up on the street. Many are victims of assault. It is socially unacceptable that women who make the hard decision to leave their community as a matter of personal safety end their North-South journey wandering the streets down South. It is imperative that the Québec Government, in close collaboration with the agencies already working with these women, establish an intake structure offering alternatives to the street that guarantee them access to housing, social services and health care and prospects for a future that corresponds to their aspirations.

Recommendation 3

That the Québec government increase the number of Programme Accès Logis housing units for metropolitan Montréal and dedicate some of this additional social and community housing for Inuit at risk of homelessness.

⁶ http://ville.montreal.qc.ca/pls/portal/docs/PAGE/CONS_MONTREALISES_FR/MEDIA/DOCUMENTS/CM_itinerance_2008.pdf, page 6

Recommendation 4

That the Québec government increase the resources of community agencies working with homeless Inuit in Montréal and other cities in Québec confronted with growing Aboriginal populations living on the street.

Housing and work

Workers from the South enjoy certain advantages in terms of accommodations provided by their employer. They don't all have the same benefits because they aren't all hired by the same organization or agency, but they generally enjoy better housing conditions than others in Northern communities.

The benefits for employees differ because their situations vary depending on their sector of work. The Kativik Regional Government (KRG) owns and manages 145 housing units. It can allocate housing to "relocated" employees and their families because it has approximately the same number of employees from year to year, since its mission isn't tied to the demographic growth of the population it serves.

Unlike the KRG, the Ministry of Health and Social Services hires a growing number of employees each year to meet needs that are growing in proportion to the furious rate of population growth. It then requires them to share housing with other workers from the South, more often than not making it a condition of hiring because of the inadequate supply of housing. The shared living quarters can last from six to twelve months, until personnel turnover frees up a unit that had been occupied by another worker who has returned South. In addition, spouses, children and even pets are not tolerated, because there's no room for them.

Because of this situation, a good candidate for a job may be rejected because she or he has children. A health-care specialist may pass up a job for which she is qualified and declared suitable because she doesn't want to leave her children in the care of relatives down South. The situation also influences the retention factor for individuals, since a worker may decide to go "home" down South after exhausting his or her patience in the tensions and conflicts that often arise in shared housing...

One of the equally harmful consequences for Northern communities is that employers often no longer even post new positions approved by Québec because they can't help new workers out with their housing requirements.

Thus, flying in the face of common sense, communities are deprived of the skills needed in Northern society, and the development of services that should be provided to the population is systematically blocked – because of the lack of housing.

Recommendation 5

That a sufficient number of residential units be set aside to allow the hiring and retention of personnel from the South with the qualifications in demand in the North.

Despite the cohabitation increasingly imposed on many of them, workers from the South don't experience the overcrowding suffered by the Inuit; as well, their rent is often subsidized – a benefit provided in exchange for their willingness to leave everything behind to go and work in Nunavik.

Our intention here is not to penalize these workers. But in a society striving for more justice and fairness for all citizens, it is in our opinion abusive not to allow the inhabitants of the fourteen villages in the region to enjoy a decent standard of living that is the same for all. The discrimination against workers in the North must cease immediately.

Recommendation 6

That the federal, provincial and regional levels of government eliminate differential treatment in housing and thus provide workers in the North with housing conditions equivalent to those they have in the South.

Immediate needs

When we visited Kuujuaq in March 2011, Mr. Watson Fournier, general manager of the Kativik Municipal Housing Bureau (KMHB), explained that a survey done in 2010 indicated that one thousand social housing units were needed right now to overcome the current crisis in the fourteen villages in the Far North. This number does not take into account the many births each year, which means that it was outdated as soon as it was released. In short, family growth outstrips projected housing needs, because young people in Nunavik are founding families at a very young age, younger than in the South.

The KMHB manages 2,300 housing units in the fourteen communities of the Far North. Ninety per cent of the population there lives in low-rent housing, with rent based on the size of the unit rather than what tenants can afford to pay (as is standard practice in the South). A 2004 survey showed that the legitimacy of this method was based on the stated wishes of the Inuit. This means that even people who are comfortably off financially pay low rents. However, people who can't pay the amount of the rent are given an adjustment upon proof of their inability to meet their obligations.

Recommendation 7

That governments facilitate access to social and community housing by supporting the KMHB's development plan unreservedly.

Although sixty housing units have been or will be built between 2010 and 2015, the KMHB has asked the Québec and Canadian governments for more. The efforts invested in construction by the different levels of government vary greatly. The federal government seems to lag behind, its position being that Québec's responsibility is greater than its own since Nunavik is an integral part of the province, in contrast to Nunavut, which is a Canadian territory.

Is a petty jurisdictional quarrel between levels of government going to cause this unacceptable situation to drag on?

It seems that there is no political will to solve the devastating housing crisis: not enough housing is being built, but a small fortune is being spent caring for and rehabilitating victims of the social problems caused by the housing shortage. The proof? The health system goes to great expense to treat people in therapy or detox programs and then sends them back to a toxic environment.

Thus, even if it takes astronomical amounts to build and maintain housing, the amounts poured into social and health costs must be taken into consideration when costs are weighed. Investment in housing is an investment in a population's physical and moral vitality.

Implementation of the Plan Nord and social development of local communities

In its drive to develop the North, the former Liberal provincial government stressed its intention of aiming for sustainable development, which necessarily includes favourable repercussions for the populations affected by the Plan Nord now and in the future. However, the government never gave itself the necessary leeway for doing this, because it perpetuated a system of mining royalties that didn't generate enough revenue to meet the demands of sustainable development, let alone solve the stark housing shortage in Nunavik.

In this regard, the new PQ government has also committed to developing the North in a spirit of sustainable development. According to the PQ, natural resources must be developed for the benefit of the population of Québec – something the Liberals never managed to do. The PQ seems to want to remedy the situation with its promise of a thorough review of the royalties system in order to improve fiscal revenue for the State. It considers that Québec society must take back control of its natural resources. For us, this cannot be done without the participation of the Inuit and First Nations.

Remember: the Québec government must ensure that its policies on the development of natural resources take account of human rights, and it has the obligation to incorporate the norms and standards of the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* in its development projects, including the Plan Nord. These norms and standards include the right, free of all discrimination, to improvement of their economic and social conditions, notably in the areas of education, employment, vocational training and retraining, **housing**, sanitation, health and social security.⁷

It follows that no government can offload its obligation to take into account the glaring needs of the Inuit populations with respect to the development of housing and by extension to health in general. If there is money to help contractors and mining companies, there should be even more to provide support for the populations that suffer.

As for mining royalties, the central council considers that they are clearly inadequate and that the population of Québec is fully entitled to its fair share of the wealth generated by the development of its natural resources.

Recommendation 8

That the Québec government establish a just and fair system of royalties that takes into consideration the needs of the Aboriginal populations.

Recommendation 9

That the development of northern Québec be carried out with respect for human rights – those entrenched in the international covenants ratified by Canada, and binding on Québec, and those spelled out in the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*, endorsed by Canada.

Conclusion

It is high time for governmental decision-makers to commit to solving the housing crisis in Nunavik once and for all! Investment in residential development in the North is in itself synonymous with development for construction companies in the South.

⁷ Excerpt from the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*, Article 21

So there is no reason not to bank on a strategy that is win-win for everyone around the table.

At the same time as housing units are added, the necessary services and infrastructure need to be planned. The distribution of electricity, the general management of the water supply, road construction and repair, etc., will obviously be necessary to meet the higher demand stemming from the construction of new housing.

An integrated sustainable development approach must be put forward to support the populations of the fourteen villages in Nunavik in their determination to overcome the slump caused by the current housing crisis. Governments, in close collaboration with local players, must come up with a plan that will draw on all the players concerned (ministries, civil society organizations, unions, builders, etc.) to succeed in improving the living conditions of the population of Nunavik.