



Social Enterprises  
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# Mining and the Social Economy in Baker Lake, Nunavut

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**A research report prepared for the Northern Ontario, Manitoba,  
and Saskatchewan Regional Node of the Social Economy Suite**

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Entreprises sociales  
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et communautés durables



## MINING AND THE SOCIAL ECONOMY IN BAKER LAKE, NUNAVUT

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The project also includes more than fifty community-based organizations in four provinces, the United States, Colombia, and Belgium.

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## ABSTRACT

THE INUIT OF BAKER LAKE RELY HEAVILY UPON THE LOCAL social economy for their material, social, and cultural well-being. The most prominent “institution” in the local social economy of Baker Lake is the mixed economy — household reliance upon a combination of harvesting, household clothing and tool production, and money from a variety of sources including government transfers, simple commodity production, and wage labour. The various components of the mixed economy have relationships with one another that are in some ways mutually supportive and in others, contradictory. This is perhaps most apparent in the relationship between harvesting and wage labour, especially when nonrenewable resource extraction is a substantial source of employment. Due to the contradictions between these two activities and the continued and arguably irreplaceable role harvesting plays in community well-being, it is necessary to take a balanced and cautious approach to industrial activity. In the context of Baker Lake, the existing Meadowbank Gold Mine is a project not entirely irreconcilable with notions of balanced economic development and has thus far, with a few important exceptions, played a primarily positive role in the community. The proposed Kiggavik uranium mine, however, — if it becomes a reality — would represent a departure from a logic of balanced economic development and may have substantial negative implications for the local social economy, and more generally, the Inuit of Baker Lake.



## INTRODUCTION

**B**AKER LAKE IS A MAINLY INUIT SETTLEMENT AND THE ONLY inland community in the Kivalliq region of Nunavut. Its residents continue to rely heavily upon the local social economy for their material, social, and cultural well-being. They have acquired additional income from the Meadowbank Gold Mine, operated by Agnico-Eagle Mines north of Baker Lake, which has employed many Inuit during the construction phase of the project. The community is also currently faced with a proposal by Areva Resources Canada Inc. to mine uranium from the Kiggavik ore body near Baker Lake. Mining projects inevitably have profound implications, both positive and negative, for the social economy in Aboriginal communities located nearby.

This article is based upon two months of community-based research in Baker Lake, which included personal observation as well as twenty-five interviews with a variety of community members (Elders, hunters, wage-earners, politicians, men, women, and youth over the age of eighteen). I also examined policy documents and a number of secondary sources to assess the relevance of the concept of the social economy to Baker Lake residents and the role that mining plays in the contemporary social economy of the community. I argue that smaller projects like the Meadowbank Gold Mine can offer a great deal more to Baker Lake than large mega-projects such as the proposed Kiggavik mine.

## THE SOCIAL ECONOMY IN BAKER LAKE

IN GENERAL, THE TERM “SOCIAL ECONOMY” REFERS TO ECONOMIC activity that focusses on benefitting communities, which can be contrasted with strictly profit-motivated capitalist production (Fairbairn 2004). Francis Abele (2009) defines social economy as “the part of the social productive system that lies outside the direct ambit of government programs and large businesses” (38). A third sector of the economy, external to corporate capitalism and the state, the social economy includes “small businesses, not-for-profits, co-operatives, family-based production, traditional or non-commodified production, and volunteer support to others” (38). In the context of Canada’s Aboriginal North, Abele sees local mixed economies as the “centrepiece” of the social economy (38).

The concept of the mixed economy has a great deal of history in the discourse surrounding northern economic development. In his report for the public inquiry into the Mackenzie Valley Pipeline in the 1970s, Thomas Berger (1988) emphasized the fact that northern Aboriginal people in Canada often rely upon a variety of economic activities to satisfy their material needs, including the harvesting of wildlife for local consumption, the sale of products from harvesting wildlife (especially furs), local wage employment, and industrial wage employment (21–22). The *Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples* (RCAP 1996) lists several other economic activities that play a role in local mixed economies — public service employment, subsidies to the harvesting sector (in the context of Baker Lake, this included the various Harvester Support Programs operated by Nunavut Tunngavik Inc. and the Government of Nunavut), and social welfare transfers.

In Baker Lake, the products generated by the mixed economy, especially harvested foods, are generally shared through extended kinship relations, which include individuals whom non-Aboriginal Canadians would generally classify as kin (biological relatives and their spouses) as well as individuals and families that lie outside of Euro-Canadian notions of

family and are related in Inuit-specific ways, e.g., through naming practices and hunting partnerships. In addition, many of the Inuit with whom I spoke expressed a need to support other non-kin community members who were otherwise unable to provide for themselves, especially Elders, widows, and persons with disabilities. Others indicated that they were willing to share food with anyone in the community who was in need, and that their personal dignity was reliant upon their willingness to share food with people who asked. These observations appear consistent with other, more rigorous, studies of contemporary Inuit food-sharing practices that focus on the particular mechanisms involved in the sharing of goods (both hunted foods as well as some purchased foods and hunting equipment) and the fact that Inuit harvesting is generally motivated by a desire to help provide communities with a source of healthy food (Wenzel 1995, 2000). These motivations and mechanisms of distribution clearly fall under the social economy umbrella as they are productive activities intended to benefit communities rather than individuals.

## HARVESTING, MINING, AND THE MIXED ECONOMY

THE ROLE OF HARVESTING IN THE CONTEMPORARY MIXED ECONOMY

**T**his is quite profound, as the Inuit continue to rely upon harvesting activities for numerous aspects of their well-being. Many of the people I encountered during my time in Baker Lake, especially Elders, still depend upon harvested food for a substantial portion of their diet. When I visited the homes of people I interviewed, most had raw caribou — on cardboard on the floor — available for people to eat casually throughout the day. Some were kind enough to provide me with gifts of fish and caribou after interviews. A number of Elders attributed this continued reliance on harvested foods, in part, to the difficulty they have digesting imported provisions and the higher nutritional quality of harvested food.

While Elders may, on average, have the strongest reliance upon harvested foods in Baker Lake, many of the youth I spoke with also highlighted the importance of hunting for their well-being. Many focussed on the fact that harvested foods are far healthier and taste better than the imported foodstuffs available in Baker Lake. Others discussed the continued reliance upon animal skins for clothing and shelter while out on the land.

In addition to a communal source of healthy food, harvesting also brings a number of other social benefits to the Inuit. The *Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal People* discusses the role that food-sharing systems play in the maintenance of community cohesion, and in turn, the role that community cohesion plays in the viability of the harvesting sector.

The social relations underlying the production of food in the traditional economy are critical to the functioning of that economy, and the sharing of food within the household and through the extended family and community are the primary means of reinforcing those social relations (RCAP 1996, 472).

The report also indicates that harvesting activities play an important role in collective and individual identity for many Aboriginal people. Many young Inuit in Baker Lake expressed pride in their land-based skills, indicating that the ability to live off the land remains an important component of Inuit identity.

While harvesting clearly remains an important component of the mixed economy in Baker Lake, its role in community well-being has changed over time as harvesting activities — and Inuit livelihoods in general — have become increasingly dependent upon the global capitalist economy. This dependency is due primarily to the colonial activities of Euro-Canadian society. Involvement in commercial whaling and the fur trade both created and reinforced Inuit dependency on manufactured goods, especially rifles, ammunition, fishing nets, and clothing. Many of the Elders with whom I spoke, however, identified the movement from scattered camps to the settlement of Baker Lake after World War Two as the major factor contributing to contemporary Inuit dependency on the capitalist economic system. Most Elders attributed this change in population distribution to the fact that their children were forced to attend day school in Baker Lake. Some claimed that police officers threatened to withhold welfare and family allowance payments, income that the Inuit had become dependent upon after years of involvement with the fur trade, if parents did not send their children to school. Rather than being separated from their children during their formative years, a prospect Elders believed would jeopardize the emotional development of their children, parents chose to settle in the community.

Many Elders described the impacts of migration to the settlement on the viability of hunting lifestyles. William Noah, a Baker Lake Elder and Areva employee, explained that caribou frequently shift their migration routes, making it nearly impossible to subsist on harvesting alone from a centralized settlement in the Kivalliq. Some years, caribou will simply

be too far away to harvest, so alternative sources of sustenance are required for these periods. Baker Lake Elders Jacob and Winnie Ikinilik discussed how movement to the settlement has made the community dependent on imported goods and technology.

Back then dog teams were the only source of travel during the winter. In the summer, we'd walk. It was easier to feed them [the dogs] because you were out there where the source of food was. When you moved to the community, it became a little harder to find feed for the dogs, and then the snowmobiles came in. It became easier. Because you're in town and not out there hunting all the time as you used to ... the feed for dogs became a lot harder [to acquire] when you moved into town. Because of it, we started losing our dogs and teams and snowmobiles eventually took over. (Jacob Ikinilik, Elder)

Today, everything you've got, we're now in houses which the Inuit didn't build; they came from the Whites but still we're living in them. Everything costs money. Whatever you want to buy whether it's food or a source of travel or whatever. If you want them, you have to buy them, you need money. Because we need money, we have to work. (Winnie Ikinilik, Elder)

Elders frequently emphasized the fact that many youth do not possess the skills and knowledge necessary to provide for themselves through harvesting. Some blamed the western school system for degrading the land-based skills in the younger generations, while others attributed the problem to settlement living in general. They feel that youth are more comfortable in town with televisions, computers, and their friends, and as a result, feel bored on the land and have little interest in learning land-based skills. However, as previously noted, many of the youth I met during my stay showed a great deal of pride in the land-based skills they had acquired and attributed considerable importance to maintaining the harvesting economy and Inuit culture in general. Nevertheless, while many Inuit continue to depend upon harvesting for their well-being, colonial forces have ensured that harvesting alone cannot provide for the Inuit of Baker Lake and that some form of involvement in the money economy is necessary.

Within Baker Lake, Inuit families rely on a variety of sources of money either to supplement harvesting practices or for their well-being in general. Simple commodity production (primarily of furs, arts and crafts), government transfer payments (welfare, employment insurance, and old age pensions), and harvester support programs all provide varying degrees

of income. However, wage labour employment in the service industry, municipal and territorial government sectors, and increasingly, mineral exploration and mining, is rapidly becoming the most lucrative source of money for Baker Lake residents.

Wage labour, particularly in the mining industry, presents a variety of contradictions within the mixed economy. On the one hand, the employment opportunities support the harvesting sector. Wage labour provides the money to invest in harvesting equipment, covers other costs associated with harvesting, and offers material sustenance when wildlife is scarce and for people who are not able to engage in harvesting. But mining is also antagonistic to the harvesting sector, considering the environmental destruction associated with exploratory and extractive activities, as well as the notions of time and space implicit in wage labour.

Antagonisms based on environmental destruction are largely self-evident. Poor calf productivity due to low-flying aircraft harassing the caribou herds, the contamination of fish due to tailings spills in waterways, and the interruption of caribou migration routes by infrastructure related to mineral extraction (e.g., roads and pipelines) are but a few examples of how mining and exploration activities can destroy the resource base upon which harvesting activities depend. Furthermore, the notions of time imposed by wage work — where time is kept according to socially determined intervals and activities are determined by time read on a clock or watch — differ greatly from temporal systems related to harvesting, which are dependent upon environmental and social variables including the presence of game, travel conditions, and the availability of hunting companions. There is no guarantee that harvesting opportunities for wage-labourers (primarily weekends and holidays) will be ideal or even acceptable for harvesting pursuits. This is resulting in a general decrease in harvesting activities. Some Inuit I interviewed claimed that far fewer of them are hunting now that the Meadowbank Mine is open, and that it is much more difficult for Elders to find someone to hunt for them.

Extractive projects utilize space in a way that is hostile to the harvesting economy. Fences can block travel routes, and mines and mining infrastructure can interfere with harvesting infrastructure (e.g., meat caches, campsites, fishing weirs, and *inuksuit*). The construction and operation of a road from Baker Lake to the Meadowbank Mine has generated a great deal of local controversy. The Inuit were initially promised free access to the road, which was built over an existing all-terrain vehicle trail utilized for harvesting pursuits. But restrictions imposed by territorial regulatory boards later repealed this privilege. Following negotiations and political action by the Baker Lake Hamlet Council, the Inuit can now ac-

cess the road with a permit issued by the local Hunters and Trappers Organization (HTO). While this compromise is acceptable to most people I spoke with, many feel it is far from ideal. It is essential to act promptly when caribou are nearby, as they may move elsewhere relatively quickly. Waiting for the HTO office to open, especially on a weekend or when employees are on holidays, can seriously compromise the ability to leave on a hunting trip.

Despite these issues, an increase in mining activity remains the federal government's primary answer to Nunavut's economic and social problems and is increasingly being seen by the Inuit Land Claims Corporations (Nunavut Tungavik Inc. and the various Regional Inuit Associations) as central to Nunavut's future. While the federal government seems to view the Territorial North as a resource frontier that should facilitate the economic growth of the country rather than an Aboriginal homeland in need of human development, the Inuit organizations' support for mining stems from the dependency imposed by colonialism and aspects of the Nunavut Land Claims Agreement that encourage them to rely on mining royalties for their political and economic clout (Bernauer 2010). However, if mining is to play a role in Nunavut's economic future, a controlled and balanced approach is imperative if the well-being of most Inuit is to be improved or simply maintained in the process.

## A NEED FOR CONTROLLED AND BALANCED DEVELOPMENT

REASONS FOR THE NECESSITY OF A BALANCED APPROACH ARE numerous. Primary factors include the reliance upon country food as well as the negative impact of mining activity on the harvesting economy. Furthermore, mining can only be a temporary solution to Nunavut's economic problems as the ore bodies will eventually run out. It is also important to consider that while harvesting alone cannot fully support the community, neither can mining or wage labour in general. Some of the interviewees highlighted the fact that many Inuit (especially single parents) are not able to work in the mining sector because they cannot accommodate the "two-weeks-on/two-weeks-off" schedule. Others pointed out that despite agreements promising preferential hiring, many Inuit are unable to attain long-term employment at a mine due to their lack of education. One out of two adults aged twenty-five to sixty-four in the region does not have a high

school diploma, one of the lowest rates in Canada (Caron-Vuotari 2010). So while mines in the North often employ substantial numbers of Aboriginal people during the initial construction phase, the requirements for fewer but highly educated employees during the production phase will result in a dramatic decrease in local employment once construction of the mine is complete (NAHO 2008).

We must also consider the highly volatile nature of the market the mining industry relies upon, and the fact that interest in mining in the North fluctuates with changes in the global capitalist system. In addition, the system itself is riddled with contradictions and is structurally prone to periodic crises (Harvey 2001). General changes in the commodity market, as well as global economic crises of over accumulation, can result in decreased exploration and mining activity in the North. In the event of future economic crises (which a survey of the history and structure of the capitalist system reveals is highly likely), it would be desirable for Inuit to have something to fall back upon. While wage labour opportunities may help them overcome periods when wildlife is scarce, the harvesting economy can help them cope when exploration and mining activity are minimal.

Numerous other impacts associated with mining argue further for controlled and balanced resource extraction in the Arctic. The environmental destruction caused by industrial projects can affect Aboriginal health in ways well beyond depriving them of a healthy food source. Some of the most obvious, and tragic, examples of this are the effects of mercury poisoning on the Anishinaabe of Grassy Narrows and White Dog, the result of a paper mill being built upstream from their communities (Shkilnyk 1985). Rapid social change, coupled with the presence of transient labourers (both Inuit from other communities and non-Aboriginal people from the south), is also often accompanied by increases in substance abuse, sexually transmitted diseases, crime, and spousal abuse in Aboriginal communities, and can exacerbate existing housing shortages (NAHO 2008). These types of social impacts frequently have a more traumatic impact on Aboriginal women than on Aboriginal men.

## THE MEADOWBANK GOLD PROJECT AND THE KIGGAVIK URANIUM PROPOSAL

**I**N 2003, CUMBERLAND RESOURCES LIMITED SUBMITTED A PROPOSAL to open a gold mine eighty kilometres north of Baker Lake. After working its way through the regulatory process and gaining approval, Agnico-Eagle Mines Limited acquired the project and began construction in 2007. An open-pit mining operation, Meadowbank is connected to the community of Baker Lake by an all-weather access road (NIRB 2009, 1–3). The mine began the transition to production in February 2010 and is anticipated to continue producing gold until 2019 (*Nunatsiaq News* 2010).

Agnico-Eagle has thus far managed to employ a substantial number of local people. In 2009, roughly 21 percent of the workforce employed by Agnico-Eagle Mines and the construction companies were local hires, with “local” being defined as any Inuit person resident in the Kivalliq region. Of these 258 Inuit workers, 189 were employed directly by Agnico-Eagle Mines, and 141 of them were residents of Baker Lake. Information regarding the percentage of Inuit from Baker Lake employed by the construction companies is unavailable (Connel 2010). While this likely represents a substantial improvement in the quality of life for many Inuit, there is reason to believe that the situation will not be permanent. As Meadowbank makes its transition from construction to production, the number of Inuit people employed at the mine will probably decrease dramatically.

In addition to the problems related to road access between the mine and Baker Lake, there are other issues with the Meadowbank project. Joan Scottie, a local hunter and secretary of the Baker Lake Hunters and Trappers Organization, noted that the project has contributed to over-crowding, as people from other communities move to Baker Lake to take advantage of the employment opportunities at Meadowbank. Joan also expressed concern that the employment available at the Meadowbank mine has resulted in far fewer Inuit in Baker Lake hunting on a full-time basis. As a result, many community members are experiencing a shortage of meat and the Elders’ centre is having trouble finding hunters to provide

country food for residents. A number of youth who are (or were) employed at the mine expressed distaste with the conditions under which they work(ed). This was primarily related to the racially stratified workforce at Meadowbank, where the majority of Inuit employees do manual labour and cooking or cleaning, while the majority of technical and management positions are occupied by non-Inuit people. Other complaints included issues related to the use of the Inuktitut language in the workplace and sexual harassment.

Despite all these concerns, however, the majority of people I spoke with felt that Meadowbank has thus far played a constructive role in community life. Many pointed out the positive aspects of employment at the mine, especially the younger people who lack the ability and/or the interest to participate in harvesting activities. Others highlighted the fact that many youth who are interested in hunting and have extensive land-based skills can now afford better equipment and have become more productive harvesters, which allows them to feed more members of the community. However, as my time in the community ended prior to the shift from construction to production in the mine's life-cycle, I cannot comment on the overall impact of the mine on the material conditions of the majority of Baker Lake residents. This will depend upon the ability of Agnico-Eagle to manage the mine in a manner that maximizes Inuit employment and minimizes impacts on the local social economy and the community's physical and socio-economic health.

The Meadowbank gold project can be compared and contrasted to another recent development proposal for the region that has generated a considerable amount of controversy. In 2008, Areva Resources Incorporated submitted a proposal to mine uranium from the Kiggavik ore body. The proposed project is located eighty kilometres west of Baker Lake and is split between two separate sites — Kiggavik and Sissons. The company is proposing five individual mines at the sites, four open pit and one underground operation. The mine will produce uranium concentrate or "yellowcake." The life cycle of the mine is anticipated to involve three to five years of construction, fifteen to twenty years of production, and five years of decommissioning. It is estimated that hundreds of jobs will be created during the construction phase, with four hundred to six hundred personnel employed during production (Areva 2008). Should it be approved, it appears likely that the proposed Kiggavik mine will have a far more dramatic and negative impact on the social economy in Baker Lake due to the location, size, and character of the project. It seems even more likely when one considers some of the issues related to the manner in which Areva Resources is interacting and consulting with Baker Lake residents.

The project is to be constructed in sensitive caribou habitat. The Beverly caribou herd is one of the principal herds in the Kivalliq, supplying wild game to Aboriginal people in Baker Lake and other communities in the Kivalliq region, as well as the eastern Northwest Territories, northern Manitoba, and northern Saskatchewan. The herd occupies the proposed site of the Kiggavik mine during spring migration, late-summer post-calving, and fall migration, extremely sensitive points in the animals' life-cycle. Disturbance to cows travelling to calving grounds in spring is likely to result in decreased calf survival, while frequent interruption of grazing during the spring, summer, and fall may result in an increase in calf mortality and reduced pregnancy rates the following year (BQCMB 2007). Industrial activity in this region clearly holds the potential to be extremely destructive to the local social economy.

The size of the proposed Kiggavik project is an additional source of concern. Five individual mining operations over two separate sites represent a significant geographic extent of environmental impacts, as well as the potential for more intense and traumatic socio-economic impacts.

The fact that the proposed project is a uranium mine is also a cause for concern. The environmental impacts of uranium mining and milling have been found to be particularly harsh. Many of these impacts are associated with waste-rock and tailings, which are often acidic and radioactive and contain heavy metals and other contaminants. Tailings management facilities and waste-rock storage areas have severely contaminated surrounding groundwater with radionuclides, heavy metals, and other contaminants. And windblown dusts from tailings and waste-rock have contaminated the environment and wildlife. Particularly worrisome is the fact that studies have highlighted "significant potential increases in cancer risks to humans from the consumption of caribou in the vicinity of uranium mines" (Winfield et al. 2006, 23) and increased rates of lung cancer and death from silica exposure among uranium mine workers (24).

In Nunavut, mining companies attempt to involve Inuit perspectives in decisions related to the management and characteristics of the projects they undertake, primarily through public consultations. A recent publication outlines the difficulties associated with this technique of soliciting community input (Bernauer 2010a). Although not all Inuit share these concerns with the consultation process, the problems outlined here are indicative of a larger issue. The Inuit feel that the consultations should be a process in which everyone, especially Elders, is involved, but a number of problems are preventing this from becoming a reality.

Most pressing for the interviewees was the fact that, due to a lack of knowledge of nuclear physics, they were often unable to understand the issues related to uranium mining. As there is little information on this topic available in Inuktitut, unilingual Elders (the most important demographic in consultation meetings, especially regarding the protection of the harvesting economy) are limited to oral information on the dangers of uranium mining. This information is currently being provided solely by scientists hired by uranium mining companies, who some Elders feel paint an unrealistically benign picture of the mining process. Elders feel the responses to their questions are insufficient, which leaves them confused and unable to make further inquiries:

They keep telling you these good stories of products in your own home ... as an example, TV gives off radiation or is made from some sort of radioactive material ... so is your microwave ... so is the clock ... they give out radiation all over the place. They say, if that's safe ... why shouldn't our products be safe ... is the analogy they're using ... obviously it is hard to answer back when you are told that your TV produces radioactivity ... whether it is your watch, your clock, your fridge, your fast cooker, whatever is electrical it seems. They give you that answer ... it is hard to really talk back. As a real Inuk, you don't really know what else to say. But still, there are questions. It gets to the point where there may be issues that might come up, but given that type of answer, it is difficult to try and talk back. You may have concerns, but how do you explain what your concerns might be given the type of answers you are given? (Anonymous)

Given these realities, it is questionable whether the involvement of the Elders will amount to the meaningful consultation required to ensure the perpetuation of the harvesting component of the mixed economy.

Taken together, these aspects of the Kiggavik project suggest that it may well have a substantially negative impact upon many Inuit in Baker Lake. While those who rely heavily upon the local social economy will likely suffer most, the mine could potentially affect the entire community's general health through environmental contamination, disruption of the social fabric of the community, and significant disturbance to the caribou. Some form of alternate economic development — perhaps another small, less environmentally destructive mining project or the development of new markets for locally produced goods — would likely serve the needs of the community far better than a large mega-project uranium mine.

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