

BRIEFING NOTE 20: 30th OCTOBER 2019

FIELDWORK IN ITTOQQORTOORMIIT



Rachael Lorna Johnstone, Professor of Law, Arctic Oil and Gas Research Centre¹

In October 2019, I travelled with my eleven-year-old son to Ittoqqortoormiit in the Northeast of Greenland to meet with local people and learn about their views for the future of their area. Owing to fog at Nerlerit Inaat (Constable Point), the flight did not depart from Akureyri for two days. By the time we arrived, the fog had reformed and the helicopter to town was grounded. The kindness and flexibility of the local people was immediately tested as I swiftly arranged with a local man who was out hunting nearby for us to sail with him into Ittoqqortoormiit. On arrival at the harbour, we were met with a group of excitable puppies shortly before our host collected us in her ATV and took us to the cosy guesthouse.

Between Akureyri airport, Nerlerit Inaat and Ittoqqortoormiit, I held seven formal interviews and met some other local people. I had also interviewed an Ittoqqortoormiit man in Nuuk earlier in the year. These people were engaged primarily in education and tourism.

We visited the sports hall, the local school, the museum, the weather station and a family home. We played football with local children at the outdoor, all-weather pitch and my son joined a large group of children to play football during an open session at the excellent sports hall. The universal language of football facilitated immediate friendships amongst the children who between them could speak Kalaallisut, Tunumiit Oraasiat, Danish, English, Icelandic and Italian but had no common tongue.

There are a number of mining prospects that are, by Greenland standards, close to Ittoqqortoormiit as well as hydrocarbon exploration in Jameson Land. The people of Ittoqqortoormiit see both opportunities and risks to the citizens from these ventures. However, the citizens with whom I spoke were frustrated with lack of information regarding the activities whose researchers and investors rarely visited the town.

A (rare) meeting had been held on Wednesday 2nd October, a few days before our arrival, regarding mining explorations. Unfortunately, the meeting coincided with the departure of the supply-ship – a twice yearly event that is celebrated with fireworks and family festivities – so attendance at the meeting was quite low (around twelve citizens, mostly men). Owing to the weather conditions, the mining company representatives remained in town until Saturday but they did not hold another public meeting though they had held a separate meeting with local hunters.

At the meeting, the citizens expressed interest in job opportunities and what training would be required in order to qualify for a position. They also discussed possible environmental impacts and emphasised the importance of protecting the areas in which wildlife was most abundant and to prevent any pollution in river systems.

¹ This fieldwork was sponsored by the Research Fund of the University of Akureyri, Iceland.

This mining project, as well as other developments, could bring both improvements and reductions to travel connections in and out of the town. There were hopes that extractive projects might bring investment to the airport at Nerlerit Inaat. However, there were also fears that extractive companies would instead expand Mestersvig airport, 180km to the north, and that service in Nerlerit Inaat would be reduced.

One citizen with whom I spoke also saw potential for extractive companies to work with the local town to improve waste management. If they had to deal with the food, human and other waste of 300 to 500 mine workers, either by environmentally sound disposal locally or removal to waste disposal facilities elsewhere, they might be asked, for example, as part of an Impact-Benefits-Agreement, to take the waste of local people too.

Meanwhile, tourism, hunting and the public sector (e.g., education, healthcare, etc.) remain the most important elements of the local economy. Tourism in the area is currently dominated by outside providers: primarily cruise-ships with some adventure tourism. However, there are local ambitions and plans to develop a more local product, notwithstanding some feelings that there was insufficient support from the Greenland government that is perceived as focusing primarily on West Greenland. There is increasing demand for 'home-stays' with local families and one citizen helps facilitate this by matching visitors to suitable homes. There are also efforts locally to improve training and education regarding safety standards to meet the expectations of visitors. There was not a great deal of concern that extractive industries would harm the tourist industry: rather, there are some opportunities for cooperation, for example in provision of logistics services and improvement of transport links.

Hunting of musk ox, polar bear, narwhal and seal are fundamental to the survival of the town but there was frustration with the quota system that is managed from Nuuk and perceived as being designed along European principles and values that do not fit the local environment. One citizen felt that animals were being protected over humans by people who had never lived with bears. This citizen also objected to laws that prohibit export of food to Greenlanders living in Denmark, thus cutting them off from their culture. (I also learned shortly afterwards at a seminar in Akureyri that food safety laws are copied from Denmark and designed for farmed meat products.)

In Ittoqqortoormiit, I met a people with a low carbon footprint. Travel outside of the immediate area is prohibitively expensive and the high cost of fuel to run boats and ATVs means that they are used sparingly. The one shop is restocked twice per year so people do not make the 'impulse purchases' that are common in larger centres. People hunt or fish for traditional foods that remain essential both culturally and nutritionally.

Yet this is a people who in October still did not have sufficient snow to use the dogs for hunting and whose fjord remained ice-free. This is a people whose church is currently closed because its foundations are collapsing in the melting permafrost.

With a storm forecast for Tuesday 8th, our planned day of return, we made arrangements to sail back to Nerlerit Inaat on Monday afternoon under a glorious blue sky to be sure of making our connection home on Tuesday.

We express our grateful thanks to the people of Ittoqqortoormiit and the workers at Nerlerit Inaat for their warm welcome and opportunity to understand a little about their unique town.