Inuit Circumpolar Council
Statement on International Decade of Indigenous Languages
Item 7
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The ICC is one of the two distinct Indigenous peoples’ organizations from the long-recognized UN socio-cultural region known as the Arctic.

For Inuit, the pandemic has revealed that there is now an even more urgent need to remedy the long-standing infrastructure DEFICIT that contributes to vulnerability and underlies the health challenges experienced by too many of our people. The gaps in basic infrastructure continue to contribute to severe health risks. Among other issues, the lack of housing and overcrowding, lack of potable water, food insecurity, lower life expectancy, suicide, lack of health care clinics, and a high prevalence of tuberculosis are among the inequities experienced by our people that are directly linked to poor infrastructure. Given these conditions, we have seen how the spread of disease can happen quickly. Hence, the need for concrete responses by government and others. We call on governments to close the infrastructure gaps throughout Inuit Nunaat by making major new investments in our communities, prioritizing basic needs.

Before the pandemic, we began addressing Inuit youth suicide. Today, we are mindful of the diverse mental health issues that have arisen due to the pandemic. These mental health dynamics are compounded by numerous other pressures in the Arctic. Identification of solutions in collaboration with Inuit must be found. We urge the PFII to review the work that Inuit and other Arctic Indigenous peoples have contributed to the Arctic Council briefing document on Covid-19.

Finally, we look forward to addressing the impacts of the pandemic and other serious health matters at our forthcoming Inuit Health and Wellness Summit now scheduled for September 2021.
CORONAVIRUS AND OTHER HEALTH RISKS AMONG INUIT

March 3, 2020 – Anchorage, Alaska – As the world community initiates response to increasing number of coronavirus outbreaks, ICC expresses concern about how our rural, remote communities are potentially at much higher risk and exposure to such epidemics due to the chronic lack of basic infrastructure, including lack of sewer and running water in many of our communities.

The spread of the coronavirus highlights the urgent need to remedy the profound infrastructure deficit in Inuit Nunaat that contributes to vulnerability and underlies the health challenges experienced by too many of our people. Inuit communities historically experienced devastating loss of life due to lack of immunity to preventable diseases such as influenza, tuberculosis, and other viruses and diseases. The lethal impacts of disease were compounded by the absence of the resources and infrastructure required to effectively prevent and respond to them. The basic conditions that contributed to vulnerability in the past continue to exist in too many of our communities today, contributing to a high prevalence of tuberculosis, respiratory infections, and greater susceptibility to other viruses and diseases.

Despite being the original inhabitants of some of the most affluent countries in the world, gaps in basic infrastructure continue to contribute to severe health risks. Overcrowding, food insecurity, lower life expectancy, and a high prevalence of tuberculosis are among the inequities experienced by our people that are linked to poor infrastructure. Many homes lack running water and a flush toilet. Many more depend on aging and deteriorating piped and haul systems. These conditions contribute to severe and multiple illnesses, including invasive pneumococcal disease that are among the highest in the world. Household overcrowding has numerous interrelated adverse impacts, from mental well-being to physical health.

ICC calls on governments to close the infrastructure gaps throughout Inuit Nunaat through major new investments in our communities, prioritizing basic infrastructure such as housing, water, and sewer. And, ensuring that this investment supports climate resilient infrastructure critical for our communities that are dealing with the most significant impacts of climate change. This is the only way to create social and economic equity, support population health, and reduce vulnerability to virus and disease. In addition, when designing local, regional, and national response and preparedness to the coronavirus and other infectious diseases, governments must acknowledge the challenges that Inuit communities face. Because of these conditions, combined with looming threats such as the coronavirus, Inuit leaders across the Arctic are concerned about the compounded threats to our basic health and well-being and cultural integrity.
Ongoing Coronavirus Pandemic Highlights Infrastructure Gaps Across Circumpolar Regions Related to Inuit Health – Demonstrates Strength of Inuit Culture

April 21, 2020 – Anchorage, Alaska – As the coronavirus global pandemic continues, the Inuit Circumpolar Council, and its Circumpolar Inuit Health Committee (CIHSC) continue to express strong concerns about the potential elevated health risks and exposure faced by our rural and remote Inuit communities. The lack of infrastructure to address the housing crisis, food insecurity, water and sewer services and broadband accessibility are very real and pressing issues in most, if not all, of our Inuit communities across Inuit Nunaat. The region includes communities in Alaska, Canada, Greenland, and Chukotka (Russia) covering a vast remote area and an approximate population of 180,000.

“Inuit across our homelands are working to maintain our traditional culture under very trying circumstances,” said ICC Chair Dalee Sambo Dorough. “We are used to living together in groups. Social distancing is a foreign concept and our past experiences with such an advisory were triggered by devastating illnesses such as tuberculosis (TB), measles, and polio. This is why we must adapt. The issues we have been working to overcome for decades, such as overcrowded housing, lack of proper sewage and potable water systems, high rates of TB, and poor broadband connectivity become starkly evident during a pandemic and increase the risks of spreading the disease.”

ICC’s Circumpolar Inuit Health Steering Committee (CIHSC), composed of representatives from the four countries met last week via teleconference and discussed the COVID-19 pandemic. The Committee notes that high rates of overcrowding and insufficient housing have already proven worrisome with the elevated respiratory conditions faced by many in our communities. Coupled with the high rates of food insecurity experienced by many, our concerns are real and complex. The gaps in accessible medical services are also a very real and an even more pressing concern. If not addressed, they will contribute to increased risk of infection and potential loss of lives. While those outside of the Arctic are simply turning to technology for work and otherwise, access and availability to basic and affordable broadband across much of Inuit Nunaat, especially during this time of a global pandemic, has created an unfortunate and stark disparity. Connectivity is essential. These disparities have been seen to have adverse effects in other populations and have shown to increase the rates of COVID-19.

The CIHSC also underlined that physical distancing and social isolation, while necessary to flatten the curve, have an impact on us. For Inuit, as a distinct people, family is at the core. Sharing food, supporting each other and being together physically defines us a culture. But, in these uncertain times we are learning new ways to keep our connections and to support each other and we look forward to a time when the pandemic has subsided, and we can get back to the ways that have sustained us for millennia. In addition, with a forthcoming Inuit Health and Well-Being Summit, the committee is considering how to bring forward the lessons learned from this pandemic to ensure future preparedness and identify strategies and priorities to fully close the existing gaps and end the disparities.

Since our initial call to governments to close the infrastructure gaps throughout Inuit Nunaat through major new investments in our communities, prioritizing basic infrastructure such as housing, water, and sewer and broadband connections, we are seeing similar demands being echoed by other Indigenous peoples across the globe. Social and economic equity, and supporting population health, and reducing vulnerability to virus and disease is critical. Our concern has only increased because we see the compounded threats to our basic health and well-being manifesting themselves in a very real way.