

Laval's Northern Housing Forum takes long-distance look at Inuit housing woes

"You keep doing the same things and getting the same results"

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QUEBEC CITY— How to deal with Nunavik's housing crisis — that's what dominated discussions Oct. 28 at a housing forum held in Quebec City, 1,500 kilometres away from the region.

If anything, the [Northern Housing Forum](#) at Laval university showed that the answer to Nunavik's housing problems is unlikely to be found in the South.

"You keep doing the same things and getting the same results," said Jonathan Epoo of Kuujjuaq, the only Inuk presenter from Nunavik able to attend the forum, who last year spurred on demonstrations to [protest the Kativik Municipal Housing Bureau's](#) rent hikes and eviction policies.

Quebec's native affairs minister, Geoff Kelley, delivered the same message during his opening address to the forum, namely that "the status quo isn't working anymore."

Yet throwing more money into building and renovating social housing isn't the answer, Kelley said: this won't solve everything and spending more public money simply isn't sustainable.

But Quebec should — and could — give up tax income from new resource developments and profits from its wealthy power corporation, Hydro-Québec, suggested presenter Gérard Duhaime, a Laval economist, who's led studies on [poverty in Nunavik](#), [consumer spending in the region](#) and its [high cost of living](#).

A 30 per cent contribution from Hydro-Québec's revenues alone would be enough to cover all the costs of services and programs to Cree and Inuit communities, nearby the power corporation's huge hydro-electric projects, Duhaime said.

Officials in the South created today's housing problems, he said — and although the James Bay and Northern Quebec Agreement isn't clear about who should pay for more housing now — Ottawa or Quebec City, the governments could and should step up to pay, Duhaime said.

That's because our governments make choices, Duhaime said — and "I don't think we make the right choices," he said.

Duhaime also offered a historical outline of how the failure of past government policies in Nunavik led to the housing shortfall, [estimated at 899 units in 2013](#).

Inuit wanted to build houses in the 1950s as they moved into communities to become closer to government services, he said, but they were discouraged from living in the stone houses and makeshift shelters that some people built.

At the same time, Inuit couldn't buy housing materials until the northern co-operative associations started in 1959.

Then, government officials finally decided to sell matchbox houses to Inuit, but without any money-based economy, no one could buy or even then rent them, when the plan to offer the tiny houses for sale flopped.

Current policies are still unworkable, Duhaime said.

These policies don't encourage home ownership or rental payment among Nunavimmiut: workers brought into Nunavik from the South get to live in new subsidized housing, while those in the Nunavik are asked to pay rising rents for aging social housing units or to build costly private homes.

Although it's easy to see why voters rejected the [Nunavik Regional Government proposal in 2011](#) because their original ideas had been changed during the negotiation process, Nunavik needs more regional autonomy, economically and politically, Duhaime said.

Right now, federal and provincial officials seem to pass off responsibility for the housing crisis in Nunavik, he said.

But fixing that situation is not so easy, Kelley told *Nunatsiaq News* after listening to Duhaime.

Quebec must look at Nunavik's housing needs against those of eight million other residents in Quebec who want better infrastructure and services, Kelley said.

As for the figure of 30 per cent for the sharing of resource revenues, that's high, although royalty sharing is on the table, said Kelley, mentioning the meeting [held earlier this month](#) between Quebec Premier Philippe Couillard and Nunavik leaders.

Kelley said he's worried about the future though — and what will happen to growing generation of Nunavimmiut who will be seeking housing in the future.

Their growing numbers — with six in 10 of the region's 12,000 residents under the age 18 — were among other concerns raised repeatedly during the forum, along with the high cost of construction, which limits the design of houses, the impact of climate change on construction and how the housing shortage affects health.

To show the role that housing plays in health comes a new project called [“Housing, health and well-being in Nunavik and Nunavut”](#) undertaken by Quebec City's university research centre and Laval.

Interviewers, now in Nunavik, plan speak to people who are on the wait-list for new social housing units in six Nunavik communities and in four Nunavut communities — and then they will interview them again after they eventually move into new housing.

The Northern Housing Forum, which took place before the Oct. 29 opening of the [Inuit studies conference, *Qaumaniq: Enlightening Knowledge*](#), on the campus, reflects Laval's growing interest in the North — which also includes involvement in a [new northern research centre, Institut nordique du Québec](#).

But, at the forum, you could count the number of Inuit among the 200 participants on less than one hand. No elected Nunavik officials from Makivik Corp., the Kativik Regional Government, Northern Villages or the KMHB were present, despite having received invitations to attend.

Yet, had more Inuit been at the event, which took place nearly entirely in French, they wouldn't have had any Inuktitut interpretation available due to its cost, organizers said.