

## **Sustainable communities – through close cooperation between workplaces and employees**

Honored participants of the Inuit Circumpolar Council's General Assembly!

What we are dealing with now is quite similar to what we were dealing with this spring in May at a seminar in Greenland. At the seminar back then the topic was how "To make development in small communities".

In my speech as the president of the association of municipalities at that seminar my point was: We have to implement development based on the fact that we have towns and settlements with a diverse population scattered over a vast area. We also have to ensure that the administrators of different fields in the communities cooperate closely.

We can benefit from the varying possibilities and conditions by merely perceiving them as strength. A small town with a population of 2000 has a strength that a settlement with a population of 200 does not have. Likewise, a settlement with a population of 200 has a strength that a small town of 2000 does not have.

I feel quite sure that looking at the possibilities for development from such an angle may also be beneficial to the countries that we work with through ICC – for although we inhabit the vast polar region and are dispersed in small numbers all over it; our living conditions have many similarities.

When discussing sustainable communities we can of course not avoid discussing the development of infrastructures and different strategies for supplying communities – for example harbor facilities, commodity supply, development of trades and how to spread new information based technology.

However, if a community is to succeed in terms of sustainability the employees holding key positions in various fields in a community and the inhabitants must work closely together. According to experience, this is what works.

In communities teachers, business or factory leaders and health personnel – to mention a few with a more specified knowledge than others – are all rallying points through their line of work and thus have a great impact on the customs and methods of the people inhabiting a given place.

It is essential to be aware of the importance of such a fact. Therefore, at the seminar in Greenland this spring I encouraged the settlement boards and varying local professionals to ensure that they work together in an institutionalized manner.

I am only trying to make clear that history shows that when diverse professionals by their own will share a common focus, they have a great impact on the life of a shared place of

living in many various ways, especially in smaller communities – in terms of jobs, in the social sphere and mentally. It is still so.

In this process I want to emphasize the importance of involving the citizens – for also here history shows that making decisions about communities without hearing the involved citizens leaves nothing but resentment and disempowerment. We saw this in Greenland in the 1960's from the consequences of the decisions as to which settlements should be closed down and which not. We also saw this when the coal mine in Qullissat was closed and people were told to abandon the town.

I am sure that the authorities back then did what they believed to be the best.

But imagine how different the outcome would have been had the citizens been closely involved in the process and maybe how better acceptable the result could have been. Some of the settlements could probably not have been saved through citizen involvement alone – however, this would have been done in mutual understanding. Right there is where you find the crucial difference.

We must learn from what was wrongly done.

In this respect I cannot help but mention that we in the association of municipalities in Greenland are interested in and are following a project initiated two years ago by one of the four municipalities, Qeqqata Kommunia – a project of sustainability and development by making the most of things in that polar community towards 2020.

The project was started with a focus on making the most of things and on sustainability. In cooperation with a private development fund and by citizens involvement plans were begun for the following overriding fields:

- The environment, electric power and construction
- Trades, transportation and finances
- Training and social services

The project that has several sections and comes in several stages has up till now shown a tangible result; that is, school children were given an iPad.

In this particular respect the founding idea is of course that opening up to the world beginning from the children is a most suitable way to reach sustainability and making the best of things.

In the beginning I mentioned that we could benefit from the varying possibilities and conditions by perceiving them as strength. By this I also mean that the tribe living in the Polar Regions settled down in small numbers and widely spread out because people were

living from sea mammals and fish and adapted to varying possibilities – and as such been able to sustain as a community.

In these modern times it has become necessary to supplement making a living from sea mammals with mining. And if communities are to sustain in the future, we shall have to adapt to this.

This is a challenge. But thinking about the fact that our ancestors have adapted to varying conditions and held on to being a sustainable community, I believe we can overcome that challenge – by being good at involving citizens, by strengthening households and by attending to the environment and to nature.

Thanks for giving me this opportunity.

Martha Abelsen

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