

What Counts as Sustainability – And Who Gets to Decide?

Uncovering Inuit Perspectives on Sustainability through Reflexive
Thematic Analysis of Knowledge Governance and Culture

MASTER'S THESIS

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Abstract

This thesis aimed to examine the diverse perspectives on sustainability within and between Inuit communities in Greenland, Nunavut, and Alaska, and to compare them with those of non-Inuit communities. This thesis is a comparative case study between the Pikialasorsuaq project in Greenland and Nunavut, Canada, and the Willow Project in the North Slope, Alaska. The Pikialasorsuaq is a polynya located between northern Greenland and Nunavut, Canada, a unique ecosystem that serves as a cultural landscape for the surrounding Inuit communities. External factors, such as climate change, shipping, and tourism, threaten the livelihood of the polynya. This is why the Inuit Circumpolar Council established the Pikialasorsuaq commission to find solutions for saving the Pikialasorsuaq by utilizing both Inuit and non-Inuit knowledge. The oil development in Alaska has received considerable criticism, particularly with the Willow project, which was approved by the US government in 2023. The Inuit organization Sovereign Inupiat For a Living Arctic (SILA) is strongly opposed to the project, arguing that it has a negative environmental and cultural impact on Inuit communities. However, the Inuit organization Voice of Arctic Inupiat (VOICE) supports the project, stating that the economic benefits will preserve Inuit culture. Six documents from the Pikialasorsuaq Commission, Voice of Arctic Inupiat, and SILA have been analyzed using Reflexive Thematic Analysis, investigating patterns and themes related to how Inuit frame sustainability. The theoretical frameworks of postcolonial theory, epistemological pluralism, and various types of sustainability served as critical lenses in the discussion section, where the findings were compared with one another and also with dominant non-Inuit sustainability frameworks. From the analysis and discussion, the findings showed that Inuit perspectives differ both within Inuit communities and between them. The Pikialasorsuaq Commission framed that sustainability is not only about protecting the polynya from environmental changes, but also about achieving political sustainability in

order for Inuit communities to determine what initiatives should be made. The Voice of Arctic Inupiat framed sustainability as economic, but not solely for monetary reasons, but to be able to stay on their ancestral land and preserve their culture. The organization SILA had the same goal of protecting culture and the communities; however, they believe that the Willow project will harm the land and water where they live. Both organizations on the North Slope have a focus on political sustainability, as they sought self-determination to define what sustainability means and how they should approach it. This is true for both cases, where postcolonial theory served as a lens to reveal that political sustainability is the foundation for both. Because for Inuit to act on any other type of sustainability within the kinds of sustainability, economic, environmental, social, or cultural, they would have to have the authority to do so.

This study showed that Inuit communities are diverse and cannot be generalized into one rationale. Some of the perspectives also share similarities to non-Inuit frameworks in terms of economic sustainability. However, what all the cases have in common is how the different types of sustainability overlap and are interconnected, rather than being separate entities, as is common in non-Inuit frameworks. Epistemological pluralism has helped by saying that all kinds of knowledge, from Inuit or non-Inuit, are equal, and to achieve inclusive sustainability, all knowledge should be acknowledged. This is not only true in terms of ethics, but also if sustainability initiatives are to be effective, they must include Inuit knowledge. The uncovered Inuit perspectives in this thesis are merely a reflection of what is presented in the chosen six sources. They therefore do not reflect all Inuit perspectives across regions, or from the communities that have provided the sources. Nevertheless, this thesis highlights the importance of recognizing that Inuit perspectives are not uniform, but share some commonalities, and could therefore serve as a framework for other Inuit communities.

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1. Introduction

Sustainability has become a prominent theme in global environmental discourse, and the way different groups perceive and understand sustainability varies. According to Throsby & Petetskaya (2016), a Western perspective on sustainability tends to focus on economic, social, and ecological aspects. However, these frameworks tend to differ from Indigenous perspectives, such as those of the Inuit, which often reflect cultural, historical, and political concerns about sustainability (Marquardt et al., 2024).

This introduction section also serves as a literature review, by outlining Inuit and non-Inuit knowledge systems and summarizing the existing research within this field. In the context of this thesis, the term “non-Inuit” is used to refer to the opinions, perspectives, and knowledge systems that come from outside Inuit communities. This term helps emphasize the distinction of Inuit experience perspectives, while also offering a more neutral way of describing external viewpoints.

In Western contexts, knowledge is gathered through empirical observation and quantitative data and is primarily based on science-based research (Marquardt et al., 2024). Indigenous knowledge has received increasing recognition within sustainability research, particularly in Arctic contexts. Some scholars, such as Berkes (2018) and Krupnik & Jolly (2002), have emphasized the importance of traditional knowledge within environmental monitoring. In the Arctic, Inuit knowledge has been acknowledged as being dependent on relational and intergenerational experience of the land. This challenges non-Inuit frameworks, which therefore also calls for more inclusive ways of knowing (Whyte, 2013; Smith, 1999).

Although there is a shift in research, few scholars have explored the internal diversity of Inuit sustainability perspectives across different regions and communities. For example, Hudson and Vodden (2020) have examined Inuit-led planning in Labrador, highlighting that

self-determination plays a significant role in shaping sustainability efforts. However, they do not compare Inuit perspectives within the communities. Jelinčič (2002) explores Inuit perspectives on sustainability, focusing on a specific case, also acknowledging that these views might differ in other regions or within the groups themselves. However, in contemporary literature, the generalization of perception among Inuit communities is still prominent. The lack of comparative research, therefore, reflects a gap in the literature. Even though the perspectives of Inuit and Indigenous peoples are included, it is rarely examined that there are multiple realities within Inuit communities themselves (Marquardt et al, 2024).

1.1 Aim of the thesis

Therefore, this thesis aims to explore the diversity of perspectives within and between Inuit communities on sustainability, comparing them with non-Inuit perspectives, as well as how these perspectives are understood and practiced. It also highlights the importance of this study, as multiple complexities in Inuit's perspectives may not be fully recognized. So, to fully understand the meaning of sustainability for Inuit communities, literature cannot diminish their perspectives. It is essential to realize that one should not assume that all Inuit have the same perception of sustainability, since it could reduce Inuit identities to one, and could cause problems when dealing with sustainability initiatives, which then wouldn't fit. It is also an ethical issue and creates a romanticized version of the true "Inuit-voice", which might reproduce stereotypes. It is safe to assume that some Inuit "adopt" non-Inuit understandings of sustainability, which do not correlate with traditional Indigenous knowledge of the land, resources, and the connection to people and culture. To contextualize Inuit understandings, the following two sections examine how Inuit and non-Inuit knowledge and sustainability are framed in current academic literature.

1.2 Non-Inuit sustainability and knowledge

As mentioned, dominant non-Inuit sustainability frameworks often focus on historically emphasized measurement, economic growth, and expert-driven decision-making. When examining the Sustainability Pillars model, the Western understanding of sustainability is typically characterized by environmental protection, economic development, and social equity, which are often defined in terms of carbon emissions and biodiversity (Purvis et al. 2019). Although these paradigms are intended to overlap, they are often differentiated. Therefore, approaches to addressing environmental, social, and economic concerns are typically discussed in isolation from one another. Moreover, the Western world normally reflects an anthropocentric worldview, where nature is viewed as a resource to be protected by humans, rather than an entity in its own right (Fernández & Savcisens, 2020). It separates humans from the natural world, and sustainability is viewed as a set of problems that can be addressed through technical innovation and policy optimization (Purvis et al., 2019). In their study, Fernández and Savcisens (2020) analyzed the concept of sustainability in several Western media outlets from 1999 to 2018. They concluded that, over time, complex sustainability issues have been simplified to focus on the environment, politics, and economy, and that, despite differing views on sustainability, it has become more homogenized. Although these approaches have contributed to environmental awareness, they have often marginalized alternative ways of knowing and governing, including the perspectives of Inuit communities (Marquardt et al. 2024).

1.3 Inuit sustainability and knowledge

In contrast, Inuit understandings of sustainability look at the interconnectedness among land, water, animals, ancestors, and future generations. This means that rather than being based on efficient use of resources or quantifiable data, sustainability is closely

connected to cultural continuity, ethical responsibility, and traditional knowledge systems (Inuit Circumpolar Council, 2021). According to Berkes (2018), spirituality and knowledge brought down from ancestors are, therefore, often inseparable from environmental understandings, and land is not just inhabited, it is lived with.

Indigenous knowledge is contextual and reflects both lived experience and observational expertise (Marquardt et. al., 2024). It also evolves in response to environmental changes and political influences (Whyte, 2013; IISD, 2023). This is evident in the Pikialasorsuaq project, which illustrates how sustainability can be viewed not only in environmental terms but also in terms of cultural identity. However, Inuit perspectives should not be generalized, since differences exist both between and within the communities. This is also true for non-Inuit, where differences also exist.

Nevertheless, the contrast between dominant non-Inuit and Inuit approaches is still significant to acknowledge. As sustainability becomes an increasingly global priority, it is vital to understand the epistemological and cultural assumptions underpinning different visions of a sustainable future. By recognizing that these differences exist, without defining what is right or wrong, it is possible to create a pace that is more inclusive and incorporates ways of knowing that also reflect Indigenous values, history, and culture. This is not only necessary from an ethical standpoint, but also a way to create more effective and well-suited strategies that also reflect Inuit culture.

Therefore, this thesis is important as it addresses the need for Inuit knowledge in sustainability initiatives, as these often differ from those of non-Inuit perspectives. This research, therefore, contributes to the sense of Inuit perspectives on sustainability and how these might differ from non-Inuit research. It provides insight into how different epistemologies shape sustainability and why including Inuit concerns in research is essential.

1.4 Cases of Pikialasorsuaq and North Slope Alaska's Willow project

To explore these different issues, this thesis presents a comparative case study that examines Inuit perspectives from the Pikialasorsuaq Project and the oil development project Willow in the North Slope, Alaska. Both cases show differences and similarities in the Inuit perspective, both among and between communities. In the following paragraphs, both cases will be described, and their importance to this thesis will be explained.

Pikialasorsuaq, also known as the North Water Polynya, is a unique and ecologically rich marine area located between northern Greenland and Nunavut, Canada (Pikialasorsuaq Commission, n.d.).

Unlike other Arctic waters, this area remains ice-free during the winter, making it a vital habitat for marine life, however, external factors such as climate change, shipping and tourism threaten the livelihood of the polynya (Pikialasorsuaq Commission, n.d.). It has also served as a cultural landscape for the surrounding Inuit communities, and their livelihoods and identities are closely tied to its biodiversity (Pikialasorsuaq Commission, n.d.).

In 2016, the Inuit Circumpolar Council (ICC) established the Pikialasorsuaq Commission to articulate an Inuit-led vision for the future of the transboundary region (Pikialasorsuaq Commission, n.d.). The commission has gathered traditional knowledge and community priorities, forming a series of recommendations (Pikialasorsuaq Commission, 2017). This included establishing a group led by Inuit experts to inform decision-making, protecting the Pikialasorsuaq area, and ensuring that Inuit knowledge is integral to environmental stewardship (Pikialasorsuaq Commission, 2017).

In October 2023, the governments of Greenland and Canada took an important step by signing a Letter of Intent. They agreed to collaborate, utilizing science and Indigenous

knowledge to manage the area. They aim to protect the land and culture while supporting development that aligns with Inuit values (Pikialasorsuaq Commission, 2017).

The Pikialasorsuaq project has developed a unique approach to addressing sustainability issues. Rather than only using non-Inuit frameworks such as science or government approaches, it also emphasizes that Inuit leadership is dedicated to preserving tradition and recognizing the connection between people and nature (Pikialasorsuaq Commission, 2017). They have therefore used both Inuit and non-Inuit forms of knowledge.

The oil development case from Alaska's North Slope gives other insights into the perspectives of Inuit. Oil development in Alaska has been a central debate within economics and politics, and one of the most well-known debates, were about the Willow project (The Guardian, 2023). It is led by the company ConociPhilips, and the Willow project for oil drilling was approved by the US government in 2023 (The Guardian, 2023). The project received global attention, as many were concerned about its environmental impact (The Guardian, 2023). It received heavy criticism from many different groups, including Indigenous groups (The Guardian, 2023). However, other Inuit communities have supported the development, emphasizing that it is an opportunity for economic growth and job creation. They argue that sustainability is not only about environmental causes, but also about ensuring economic and social sustainability (Mohar & Slapar Ljubutin, 2023).

A key actor who believes this is the Voice of Arctic Iñupiat (VOICE), a nonprofit organization that represents several Inuit communities across the North Slope (Mohar & Slapar Ljubutin, 2023). They have on several occasions advocated for self-determination, stating that Iñupiat should have the right to determine what aligns with their interests (Mohar & Slapar Ljubutin, 2023). VOICE argues that the oil project will not harm their communities, and that economic growth will help preserve their culture (Mohar & Slapar Ljubutin, 2023).

Other Inuit organizations, such as SILA, believe that drilling for more oil contradicts global efforts to protect the planet and is harming the Inuit way of life, as well as their well-being and the animals living among them (SILA, 2023). They call for a total transition away from fossil fuels, to protect the environment and future generations, as they call it a betrayal against them (SILA, 2023). The organization has also received widespread global support for its opposition to these oil drilling operations (SILA, 2023). The Willow Project reveals a significant disagreement regarding Arctic sustainability.

1.5 The importance of the cases

Pikialasorsuaq is a fascinating example because it is one of the few big sustainability projects in the Arctic led by Inuit communities and uses their traditional knowledge (Pikialasorsuaq Commission, 2023). The project focuses on protecting and sharing control of the vital marine area between Greenland and Canada. It demonstrates how the Inuit view sustainability as more than just environmental protection. It is also about preserving their culture, ensuring they have enough food, and ensuring future generations can live well. Pikialasorsuaq challenges the conventional non-Inuit approach to environmental management, which is characterized by the use of technology and prioritizing efficiency.

Comparing Pikialasorsuaq with the North Slope in Alaska, particularly concerning oil projects like Willow, reveals that Inuit communities hold differing views on sustainability and development. While Pikialasorsuaq focuses on protecting nature, many Inuit groups in Alaska support responsible oil drilling because they view it as a means to build a stronger economy and gain more control over their future. However, both cases are similar, as they both utilize the right of self-determination to legitimize their political stance, yet still result in different perspectives. Comparing and examining these approaches helps to understand the complex

issues in Arctic environmental debates and highlights why we must consider each community's needs and values.

It is important to note that these cases are only a reflection of how sustainability is presented, and can therefore not define the Inuit perspectives that are included in this thesis, but only draw conclusions from what has been presented. The cases also don't speak for other Inuit communities in the same region or across regions. For example, even if this project included all Inuit regions across different countries, like Russia, it would still be impossible to generalize, because there are significant differences between and within communities and nations. Each region and community has its unique history, challenges, and views on sustainability, so it is important to remember that this is just one case study, not a universal model for all Inuit perspectives.

This thesis, therefore, focuses on how sustainability is understood and represented in Inuit-led initiatives by comparing two contrasting cases: the Pikialasorsuaq project in the Canada-Greenland region and the North Slope of Alaska. The different views of Inuit perspectives will be compared, as well as those of dominant non-Inuit sustainability discourse. By applying the theories of postcolonialism, pillars of sustainability, and epistemological pluralism, this thesis employs a critical lens that seeks to understand the underlying paradigms behind the understandings and perspectives of Inuit.

To correctly answer the problem formulation, three sub-questions have been formulated, each offering a different focus:

1.6 Sub-questions:

I. How do documents from the Pikialasorsuaq project frame sustainability concerning Inuit knowledge, governance, and ecological protection?

II. How do North Slope Inuit organizations articulate sustainability in the context of oil development concerning Inuit knowledge, governance, and ecological protection?

III. In what ways do these Inuit understandings of sustainability compare with dominant non-Inuit sustainability discourses?

By addressing these questions, the thesis contributes a deeper understanding of how different sustainability paradigms coexist, conflict, or align within Arctic sustainability politics. It also highlights the importance of epistemological plurality in shaping more just and culturally grounded sustainability strategies.

2. Theory

This section will introduce the theories that have been applied to this thesis as a critical lens. The theories of post-colonialism, epistemological pluralism, and sustainability pillars are described, along with their relationship to the thesis. Why these theories have been chosen will be explained in the methodology section 3.5.

2.1 Postcolonialism

Postcolonial theory is a method of analyzing the world that focuses on the effects of colonialism, as well as its aftermath (Smith, 1999). It examines how colonialism has affected those who were colonized, power structures, ways of thinking, and its ongoing influence today (Smith, 1999).

In Smith's "Colonization Methodologies," from 1999, she writes about how knowledge has also been colonized within Indigenous communities in various ways. In her book, Smith (1999) explains that research is deeply tied to colonialism. During colonial expansion, Western scientists and scholars were sent into Indigenous territory to measure and rank the people living there, rather than observing and learning with them. This would then

be used as “evidence” for research to justify the colonialism, and thereby also labelling Indigenous people as “uncivilized” or “in need of governance”. They were seen as “objects” of a study, rather than participants, which gave the researcher the voice and power.

Being marginalized is the result of this, but also that this would reinforce colonial ideologies, and Indigenous people are often portrayed as “primitive,” which makes them seem as if they are frozen in time and that they are not evolving (Smith, 1999). It overlooks the complexity of Indigenous cultures, their diversity, and the constant change they undergo (1999). According to Smith (1999), research is therefore biased and built to serve colonialism. She emphasizes that to decolonize, Indigenous people must be recognized as knowledge producers, rather than being treated as subjects.

In her research, Smith (1999) referenced the concept of “colonization of the mind”. This concept is very complex and extends beyond physical colonization, encompassing the impact on a person's identity, thoughts, language, understanding, and worldview (Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, 1986). “Colonization of the mind” occurs when colonized people begin to adopt the colonizer’s views about themselves (Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, 1986). That could, for example, lead them to believe that their culture is inferior and that Western education and science are superior. They internalize the colonization, and it changes who they are (Smith, 1999). It devalues the knowledge of Indigenous people, and they may believe that their ways of gathering knowledge are inferior to Western ways (Smith, 1999).

For Inuit communities, this also means that some understandings and knowledge may not be purely their own, but also a product of colonization of the mind. Denmark, the USA, and Canada have colonized Inuit communities (Raspotnik, 2022; Argetsinger, 2024). This could have influenced how some Inuit see sustainability. Meaning, it is essential to keep in mind that the colonizer’s colonization of their minds may have influenced their viewpoint.

However, this is not to be generalized. Inuit could have a more non-Inuit view, without it being caused by a colonization of the mind. According to Smith (1999), reconnecting with Indigenous identity and reclaiming knowledge systems, oral histories, and governance structures is a means of decolonizing the mind.

Decolonization is, however, not something that should be viewed as a “symbolic gesture”. In their work, Tuck and Yang (2012) critique Western institutions used for decolonization as a token, rather than as a genuine return of land or power. They argue that anything less than giving recognition to Indigenous sovereignty, returning land or power, or an end to settler entitlement is not decolonization, but rather just a metaphor. There is no synonym for decolonization; therefore, when Indigenous anything is included, the word “decolonization” is often used. Therefore, when the word is used wrong, it is seen a sign of tokenism. Tuck and Yand (2012) call this “move to innocence”, so it is a way for settlers to appear empathetic, without giving up any power and remaining in control.

In the context of Inuit sustainability perspectives and knowledge, this could mean that when Inuit knowledge and attitudes are invited to be shared, they are not given the power to define sustainability on their terms. So, when some research incorporates Inuit perspectives, the question is whether it is returning the power of the land, governance, and knowledge systems, or if it is merely tokenism that includes Inuit communities.

2.2 Epistemological pluralism

For many decades, research has employed a one-way approach to knowledge, which is insufficient when addressing complex issues that require more nuanced insights, such as climate change or social justice (Miller et al., 2008).

To tackle this, many have become interested in epistemological pluralism, which means that there are different ways of knowing, and these are all legitimate (Miller et al.,

2008). Different epistemologies should therefore not be seen as opposite, but rather as complementary to each other, to gain a better understanding of complex issues (Miller et al., 2008; Beaumont & de Coning, 2022).

Epistemological pluralism, therefore, recognizes that different knowledge systems exist, which can include both a more positivist stance and Indigenous knowledge. It also acknowledges that each knowledge system contributes valuable insights, which are all shaped by its assumptions about learning, how it is produced, and its intended purpose (Beaumont & de Coning, 2022).

Miller et al. (2008) illustrate this in an example of urban ecology and social-ecological research in Alaska, which emphasizes how efforts to manage and understand social-ecological systems often fail when applied only through one epistemological lens. Their study provides an example of attempts to manage resources that excluded Indigenous knowledge and focused solely on institutional science. This resulted in resource management failing, as the Indigenous people did not resonate with it, leading to ineffective outcomes.

This example is directly relevant to Inuit understandings of sustainability. Inuit knowledge systems are not tokens that should be applied to Western science, but should be included. Within epistemological pluralism, Inuit knowledge systems therefore exist just as readily as non-Inuit knowledge, and complement each other (Miller et al., 2008).

This point is further reinforced by Beaumont and de Coning (2022) through the lens of complexity theory. They argue that climate change research should move beyond debates about whether there is a single superior method. Instead, they encourage scholars and researchers to embrace uncertainty, be open to other ways of knowing, and foster dialogue across differences. They describe pluralism as not about collapsing different epistemologies

into one single approach. It is about allowing different learning styles to coexist while preserving their unique qualities and values.

Within research on Inuit knowledge, it is essential not to judge Indigenous insights against typical scientific standards. It is also important to note who holds power in research, so that power is not one-sided. Smith (1999) also elaborates on this, explaining that Western research has often treated Indigenous knowledge as inferior, irrational, or non-scientific. She argues that knowledge is tied to power, so who gets to produce and define what counts, and that often, research has been used to erase Indigenous knowledge systems. She also believes, as Miller et al. (2008) do, that Indigenous knowledge must coexist with Western knowledge and should be seen as equally legitimate.

Epistemological pluralism justifies the integration of Inuit knowledge into sustainability research, and it challenges the notion that there is a single way of knowing. It emphasizes that diverse epistemologies are equally legitimate and should coexist in a complementary manner.

2.3 Types of sustainability

In this thesis, sustainability is examined through a five-pillar framework “the pillars of sustainability”, which includes economic, environmental, social, cultural, and political pillars. This has been chosen as an expansion of the traditional three-pillar model of sustainability, which typically encompasses only economic, environmental, and social dimensions (Purvis et al., 2019). This model has become a standard in research; however, it has often been criticized for being too simplistic, due to its theoretical limitations and oversimplification of complex and interconnected issues (Purvis et al., 2019).

This criticism highlights that the model does account for how sustainability is shaped through cultural or political factors. This thesis, therefore, incorporates these two pillars to

provide a broader understanding of sustainability, particularly in the context of Inuit perspectives.

Although this is a typical framework for non-Inuit communities, it can still help in understanding the priorities and views that Inuit communities hold on sustainability. This framework is therefore carefully employed, and the criticism from Purvis (2019) that it is simplistic and often fails to demonstrate how the pillars overlap or are interconnected is acknowledged.

The economic pillars focus on how resources are used and the development of the economy, including concerns about jobs, trade, and innovation. The environmental pillar focuses on protecting nature in terms of biodiversity, while also addressing climate change. According to Purvis (2019), these two pillars are the most recognized within debates on sustainability, and the third pillar in Western contexts is often overlooked.

The third dimension, social sustainability, refers to the needs of individuals within society, including their access to healthcare, education, and overall well-being. This is often measured with statistics and policies, or the quality of life in a non-Inuit context. However, Throsby and Petetskava (2016) describe that social sustainability is understood more in terms of connection within Indigenous groups. This means caring for one another and sharing traditions and knowledge.

As mentioned, this thesis incorporates a fourth pillar, culture, to address the importance of cultural values, language identity, and heritage in shaping how sustainability is lived and experienced. Nurse (2006) argues that culture is not just an additional pillar, but it's the foundation upon which the other dimensions rest. This is also mentioned by Throsby and Petetskaya (2016), who show that Indigenous sustainability is very closely tied to culture in

terms of language, traditional practices, and relationships with the land. Culture is, therefore, deeply embedded in how communities understand and make decisions about sustainability.

The final pillar included in this thesis is political sustainability. Purvis (2019) argues that the standard three-pillar model often overlooks politics, yet it is essential to understand how decisions surrounding sustainability initiatives are made. It is therefore necessary to examine the role of governance within this discourse, as it may reveal power imbalances.

These three theories are used throughout the thesis as a way to understand and discover the perspectives of the Inuit. As mentioned, the use of these methods will be discussed in more detail in the following section.

3. Methodology

This section outlines what methods have been used to address the problem formulation, how they were used in the analysis, and why they have been chosen and are relevant for this thesis. The section will start by explaining the philosophical considerations that have guided the approach to the thesis and how the problem formulation is understood.

3.1 Philosophy of science

3.1.1 *Ontology*

This thesis employs a critical realist ontology, which is grounded in the work of Roy Bhaskar, first introduced in 1975 (Bhaskar, 2008). Within critical realism, it is stated that there is a real world, which exists independently of our perceptions and knowledge of it (Bhaskar, 2008). There are, therefore, constructs, mechanisms, and relations that might exist, but are not observable, and still have some effects (Bhaskar, 2008). This could include climate change, political structures, or cultural systems. Within this thesis, this would mean that phenomena such as the melting of ice in the Arctic or pressures from oil extraction

developments are acknowledged as existing, regardless of how they are interpreted by those observing them. Critical realism is highly beneficial to this thesis, as it is a middle ground between positivism, which reduces reality to only what can be measured, and constructivism, which denies the existence of a world outside our perceptions (Danermark et al., 2002; Sayer, 2000).

3.1.2 Epistemology

This thesis adopts critical realism as its epistemological stance, which posits that, although a real world exists, the knowledge we construct of it is fallible and subject to change (Sayer, 2000). Critical realism often distinguishes between the "real" world, which exists without human perception, and the "observable world" (Danermark et al., 2002). This means that people can observe the world, but the way they acquire knowledge of it differs (Danermark et al., 2002). This means that the way Inuit communities and non-Inuit communities gain their understanding of sustainability depends on the context. Critical realism, therefore, also supports a reflexive interpretation, as we can attempt to understand reality, but we must be aware of our perspective and also examine the deeper causes behind what is observed (Danermark et al., 2002; Fletcher, 2017). It therefore makes it very suitable for this study, because it helps to understand how Inuit communities' perception of sustainability is shaped by culture, but also recognizes the influence of the "real world", such as climate change or politics, on them.

3.1.3 Methodological framework

This study employs an abductive approach because it allows for a flexible process, enabling movement back and forth between data and theory (Bryman, 2016). This approach is beneficial for understanding complex concepts, such as sustainability. Abduction allows the researcher to explore previously unexplored ideas and then refine the theory throughout the

research process (Bryman, 2016; Danermark et al., 2002). This represents a middle ground between deductive reasoning, which seeks to reject or accept hypotheses, and inductive reasoning, which builds theory solely from data (Bryman, 2016).

In this thesis, the “theory” refers to ideas or concepts that are used to make sense of the world, such as how Inuit communities practice sustainability. It also includes academic theories such as postcolonialism. These theories help to understand the data, and the data may also challenge or shape the theory. As said, therefore, going back and forth between theory and data.

If this research were to use a deductive method, it could risk applying non-Inuit frameworks to the understanding of Inuit communities. An inductive approach could overlook important and deeper social systems, such as power dynamics or colonial histories, that shape perspectives and influence the way people think. An abductive approach is therefore also suited to critical realism, as it recognizes a real world that exists, but people engage with it through different knowledge systems (Danermark et al., 2002).

3.2 Case choice

This thesis is a comparative case study, with the Pikialasorsuaq project and the Willow project as the primary cases. As described in the introduction, both cases relate to Inuit knowledge and their views of sustainability. There are, therefore, some significant similarities, as both cases relate to how different communities perceive sustainability both between and among them. They also have some crucial differences, as they differ in how sustainability is framed.

The two cases serve as the primary sources in this thesis, providing various perspectives from different Inuit communities. They offer insights into how perspectives may

vary across communities in Greenland, Canada, Alaska, and also in non-Inuit communities. Thus, the cases present opportunities to understand how sustainability perspectives are both represented between and within Inuit communities.

Furthermore, a comparison of the Willow projects two organizations reveals that the two parties hold differing views on sustainability. Both cases are selected as they offer valuable insights into different epistemological standpoints, since they come from distinct ways of knowing.

The study is limited to Inuit communities in Greenland, Canada, and Alaska, as they are directly affected by the two projects. While it would be beneficial to include other Inuit communities, time and scope constraints would make this problematic. Even if this study included cases from all Inuit communities in the Arctic, it would still not be representative enough. Inuit perspectives would still differ within Inuit communities and, therefore, cannot be generalized across all Inuit communities. Though this thesis does not represent all Inuit communities, its findings may offer insights into how other Inuit groups might perceive sustainability.

3.3 Data Collection

3.3.1 Documents

To analyze how sustainability is represented in the Pikialasorsuaq and Willow projects, six key documents were examined, comprising three sources for each project. These documents will be analyzed using a Reflexive Thematic Analysis, which will be explained further in Section 4.4.1.

Document 1: Report of the Pikialasorsuaq Commission, November 2017

This report was selected as a key document because it is a vital resource that offers valuable insights into how Inuit communities understand and perceive sustainability (Pikialasorsuaq Commission, 2017). The report not only includes recommendations on how to safeguard Pikialasorsuaq, but it is also based on interviews with Inuit people in Canada and Greenland. They provide quotes in which they express their opinions regarding climate change, the meaning of Pikialasorsuaq to them, the cultural aspects, and how they gather knowledge. The report also strongly emphasizes the importance of Inuit knowledge in this project, as it directly affects Inuit communities living around the area. The commission also compares Inuit knowledge with non-Inuit knowledge, emphasizing that Inuit knowledge should not only be included but also be the leading way. Since the report directly contrasts Inuit and non-Inuit frameworks, it gives valuable insights into epistemological pluralism and postcolonial concerns. This document therefore provides direct insights into Inuit communities, and the shared quotes reveal diverse opinions, not all of which are the same.

Document 2: Pikialasorsuaq Leaders' statement, April. 2019

This document is a political statement from Inuit leaders, supporting the recommendations outlined in the 2017 report (Pikialasorsuaq Commission, 2019). Although it is shorter than the report, it still aligns with the ideas presented in the report. This statement is also more formal, as it is designed to be a public communication. By examining this statement, it can give insights into how Inuit communities present their sustainability initiatives and views to be seen by governments, institutions, or organizations.

This statement has therefore been chosen, as it helps to understand how Inuit voices are being used within policy and public discussions. This thesis connects its focus on

postcolonial ideas and the pluralism of epistemology to the understanding of different knowledge.

Document 3: Press release, 2018

This press release was published following the 2017 report and provides insights into what happened after the recommendations were made (Pikialasorsuaq Commission, 2018). It is helpful to see if ideas and concerns from the Inuit communities have been followed up on and if action has been taken. It is beneficial to analyze how Inuit perceive the implementation process. It also illustrates how traditional knowledge and community-based values are being incorporated into governance discussions and could be helpful to any non-Inuit challenges that may arise.

Document 4: VOI Statement on Willow Record of Decision

This document is an official statement from the NGO Voice of the Arctic Inupiat (VOICE), which emphasizes support for the Willow Project on the North Slope (Voice of the Arctic Inupiat, 2023). It describes the potential for economic benefits and the enabling factors for Inuit on the North Slope. The NGO highlights that the project could generate economic benefits, including job opportunities and revenue for local businesses.

They reflect a perspective where the extraction industry is a means to achieve economic sustainability, and also argue that sustainability is not only about environmental protection, but also about the well-being of their communities. Including this document highlights the diversity of perspectives between Inuit communities.

Document 5: Exploring the Willow Project in Alaska: An Interview with Voice of the Arctic Inupiat

This interview provides a more personal perspective from representatives of the Voice of the Arctic Inupiat (Mohar & Slapar Ljubutin, 2023). It is a valuable source for the thesis, providing direct insights into why some Inuit communities support the Willow project. The interview offers a more informal tone and provides direct insights into the experience of one of the VOICE representatives. VOICE highlights again in this interview that sustainability is not only about environmental causes, but also about ensuring the well-being of their communities. This perspective challenges the assumption that indigenous communities are not interested in economic development projects such as oil extraction. It aligns well with epistemological pluralism, explaining that there are different perspectives on sustainability not only from non-Inuit and Inuit, but also within Inuit communities. The interview will help showcase that local conditions shape Inuit knowledge.

Document 6: SILA press release, 2023

The final document is a press release from another North Slope Inuit organization, SILA, that describes the opposition that it has towards the Willow Project (SILA, 2023). The press release, although an outward communication tool, has a very personal connotation, as it describes how devastated and disappointed they are with the US government. They believe that this project will harm the environment, the land, and the animals that inhabit it. They are generally opposed to the use of fossil fuels and advocate for a complete transition away from them. This press release is beneficial in this thesis, as it presents a direct opposing viewpoint to that of the fellow Inuit organization, VOICE in the North Slope. It is therefore helpful to show how perspectives differ within Inuit communities.

3.4 Analyzing the data

3.4.1 Reflexive Thematic Analysis

To analyze the chosen sources, the analysis will follow the Reflexive Thematic Analysis outlined by Braun and Clarke, (n.d.), which aims to identify patterns, themes, and meanings. This analysis focuses more on the underlying meaning and perspectives, rather than just on the language use.

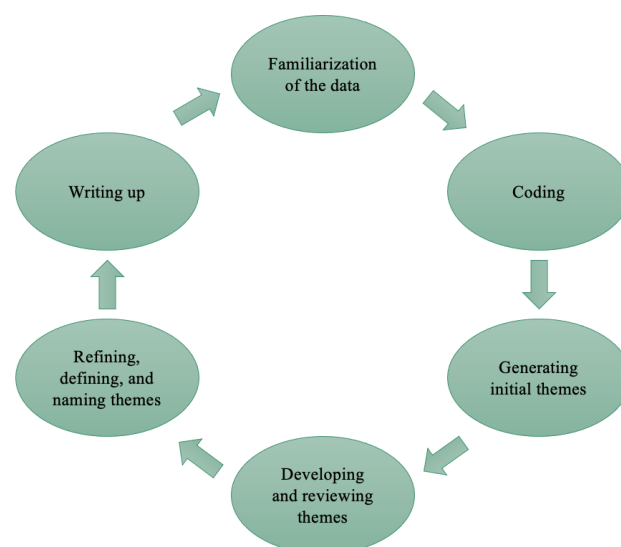
This can help uncover how sustainability is conceptualized and practiced within Inuit communities. The Reflexive Thematic method is grounded in a constructionist perspective, analyzing how realities are produced within the data (Braun & Clarke, n.d.).

A thematic analysis is beneficial as, unlike other qualitative content analysis methods, it focuses not only on explicit statements but also on underlying meanings and ideas (Braun & Clarke, n.d.). This thesis is therefore interested in the semantics of the chosen documents to uncover the perspectives of Inuit communities.

The analysis will follow the following approach by Braun and Clarke to ensure consistency and accuracy.

Figure 1

Visual of Braun and Clarke's (n.d.) Reflexive Thematic Analysis



The analysis starts by getting familiar with the sources and reading them thoroughly multiple times. Then, codes can be established by identifying key phrases or words within the document, and these codes have been assigned some initial themes, which help reveal the patterns that arise. After revising the initial themes and determining if any can be grouped, the themes are finally established.

Some of the findings and generated themes will be presented in the analysis; however, the Appendix will illustrate how the codes evolved into initial themes and then into final themes. The Appendix is presented in a linear model, but the development of themes has not been linear, as the themes have been reviewed and renamed several times before the final themes were established.

The thesis focuses on the perception of sustainability in order to explore how Inuit perspectives are presented in the chosen sources. This makes Reflexive Thematic Analysis particularly well-suited for this purpose, as it helps identify patterns and themes. To better capture these patterns, the study utilizes secondary sources for contextualization, allowing for a deeper understanding of issues such as regional knowledge and the history of colonization.

3.5 Choice of theories

3.5.1 Postcolonialism

To properly understand how sustainability discourses have been shaped by colonization, it is essential to employ a critical lens through postcolonial theory. As mentioned, policies and sustainability initiatives often marginalize Indigenous knowledge (Smith, 1999), also neglecting Inuit perspectives and cultural priorities.

Applying postcolonial theory provides a critical lens for examining non-Inuit sustainability initiatives and how they have historically overlooked Inuit perspectives. It could also help highlight power imbalances, instances that undermine Inuit decision-making.

It can help define why Inuit perspectives are shaped the way they are, and also why specific knowledge is perceived as more valid. It can also be used to explain how Inuit understandings might have adapted non-Inuit perspectives, through the concept of “colonization of the mind”, as described in the theory section.

3.5.2 Epistemological pluralism

As a secondary theory, the thesis employs epistemological pluralism, which posits that there are multiple ways of knowing, all of which should be valued equally.

This theory is very beneficial to this study, as it gives an analytical approach to challenge the dominant non-Inuit epistemologies. Both Inuit and non-Inuit give valuable insights into how knowledge is produced and exists.

3.5.3 Types of sustainability

As described, this thesis uses the pillars of sustainability framework to define how Inuit perceive sustainability. The pillars of culture and political sustainability have been incorporated into this thesis, as the three-pillar framework may be too simplistic for this study, as it does not capture the deeper levels of cultural or political importance within Inuit communities. Although it is a non-Inuit framework, it still helps define this complex discussion of sustainability. However, the criticism of this framework is acknowledged, and it is therefore applied carefully in the findings.

3.6 Ethics

Within a study like this, it is crucial to consider the ethics behind it, especially when working with Indigenous groups, such as the Inuit. Bhattacharya (2007) emphasizes the importance of showing respect for different knowledge systems. Although this thesis only uses publicly available documents, it is crucial to represent the opinions of Inuit communities carefully and not take quotes out of context (Seale, 2004). When analyzing documents like these used in the thesis, it is essential to be reflexive in interpretation, in order to explain or present what has been said (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004), and not to speak on behalf of any Inuit communities. The researcher should therefore pay attention to any power dynamics, as they could subtly influence meaning. It is therefore important to reflect (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004), which also makes the analysis method of Reflexive Thematic Analysis beneficial.

3.7 Limitations

This thesis focuses on Inuit perspectives on sustainability, acknowledging certain limitations. First, the documents used from Pikiyasorsuaq, and the North Slope are produced within specific regional contexts. They can therefore not be considered representative of all Inuit communities across the Arctic. The findings should therefore be seen as context-based, rather than being universally generalizable. Second, even though these are region-based, there is no way to conclude one perspective of any of the Inuit communities mentioned in this thesis, as it recognizes that all community perspectives vary within the communities themselves, just as they do on a regional level. It can therefore not be universally generalizable. Third, some documents are produced for public-facing communications, and their language, tone, and content may have shaped how sustainability is represented. These documents remain highly relevant and full of insight, as they show how Inuit communities are represented in such documents.

4. Analysis

The findings of the analysis are represented in this section, and the complete list of themes can be found in the Appendix and will be cited throughout the analysis. The procedure for all six sources has been the same. To get familiar with the sources, they have been read thoroughly multiple times. Key phrases, keywords, or sentences have been identified throughout the documents, which are used as codes. Each code has been assigned an initial theme, which has been examined and refined into a final theme, represented here. The method was not linear, the development of themes has been going back and forth between the initial theme and the final theme to best fit the problem formulation.

4.1 Report of the Pikialasorsuaq Commission

The document is a key document produced by an Inuit Initiative from the Inuit Circumpolar Council (ICC). The report was published in November 2017 on the Pikialasorsuaq Commission's webpage. The report presents findings from interviews and consultations of Inuit communities on both sides of Pikialasorsuaq, in Canada and Greenland. The report focuses on the future of Pikialasorsuaq, as it is an essential ecological system that supports high marine life and is home to many mammal species. The same goes for Inuit communities, which have made their livelihood from the polynya, and it has been a significant part of their lives and culture.

The report has been compiled in response to concerns from both Inuit communities about environmental changes and the lack of Inuit influence on marine-life protection governance, which affects the Pikialasorsuaq, and to determine what should be done to protect it. The commission proposes three recommendations for future governance, based on testimonies from communities and showing Inuit perspectives. The recommendation includes an Inuit-led management authority, ensuring that Inuit voices are included and leading the

initiatives. A designated protected area, where Inuit have the complete autonomy to decide how to manage it. And the re-establishment of free travel between Inuit communities in Canada and Greenland.

The report includes both direct quotes from Inuit and the conclusion the Commission has drawn from that. To investigate whether there are any differences or similarities, the two have been analyzed separately to gain a comprehensive understanding.

4.1.1 The Commission

The complete analysis with codes, initial themes and final themes, can be found in Appendix A.

Economic development pressures and shipping

In the report, the commission frames sustainability in terms of environmental risks and change, thereby emphasizing the urgency of climate change and other ecological changes. The commission highlights that increased development, which includes tourism, shipping, and resource extraction, all place pressure on the ecosystem.

“The management authority should establish a framework for regulating activities, including transportation, shipping, and off-shore industrial development. (Pikialasorsuaq Commission, 2017, p. xii)

In response to the increased shipping, the Commission states that regulations could be a possible response, as it has concluded from the Inuit it interviewed that many view shipping as problematic for the Pikialasorsuaq. However, the Commission does not rule out that shipping does have an economic effect, which benefits the region:

"Shipping is important in this region and has a significant economic effect."

(Pikialasorsuaq Commission, 2017, p. 12)

The economic development occurring in the Arctic encompasses shipping, mining, and tourism, all of which present both opportunities and challenges for Inuit communities. The activities could provide economic benefits, but they are also harmful to the environment and threaten traditional ways of life (WWF Arctic, n.d.).

Environmental change and threats

This theme highlights how the Commission frames sustainability as a response to accelerating environmental disruption. The language emphasizes the rapid pace of change and the ecological vulnerability of the region:

"The Pikialasorsuaq is seriously threatened by rapid change in the region, including climatic and environmental change." *(Pikialasorsuaq Commission, 2017, p. viii)*

Although this theme is not as heavily represented as others, it plays a crucial role in why the Commission wants to act in protecting the Pikialasorsuaq. It reflects a perspective that aligns partially with dominant Western sustainability models, which often begin with scientific assessments of environmental risk. However, in the context of the report, this threat is directly tied to the need for Inuit governance and long-term sustainability. The statement also subtly positions environmental change as justification for deeper Indigenous involvement. This connection underscores how even scientific risk discourse can serve postcolonial and pluralist goals when rooted in Indigenous authority.

Inuit knowledge and governance

This theme highlights how the report portrays the Inuit not only as participants but also as knowledge holders and leaders in environmental governance. It highlights a push toward self-determination and protection against marginalization.

In the report, the Pikialasorsuaq Commission emphasizes that it is the Inuit communities living around the polynya who are best suited to know how to care for and protect it. As the report states:

“Each community emphasized that the Inuit who live in the region are best placed to monitor and manage the region.” (Pikialasorsuaq Commission, 2017, p. X)

Because Inuit communities have lived experience and generational knowledge of the area, the report argues that their knowledge should not be a small part of governance. It should lead the way instead. Inuit should hold decision-making power in how sustainability and protection efforts are carried out:

“Inuit who live and use the Pikialasorsuaq must be recognized and respected as leaders in ensuring the protection of this area.” (Pikialasorsuaq Commission, 2017, p. XII)

The report highlights that Inuit communities on both sides of the polynya have the most profound cultural, ecological, and spiritual connection to the area:

“There is no one better suited to fully articulate the meaning and intrinsic value of the Pikialasorsuaq than those who live it and depend on it.” (Pikialasorsuaq Commission, 2017, p. 5)

To ensure that Inuit voices are not sidelined, the Commission proposes formal governance structures, such as an Inuit-led authority. This would help prevent the kind of marginalization that Indigenous peoples have historically faced in policy and environmental decision-making. This emphasis on Inuit leadership reflects a rejection of the colonial tendency to position Indigenous knowledge as secondary to Western science.

As postcolonialism suggests, by reclaiming knowledge, it is a form of decolonization since it moves away from adopting non-Inuit knowledge systems. This theme aligns well with the problem formulation, as it demonstrates that sustainability is not only about environmental issues, but also about power structures and knowledge.

Inuit communities in both Canada and Greenland have long sought self-determination to regain control over their lands and resources. In Canada, the 1993 Nunavut Land Claims Agreement established the territory of Nunavut, which granted Inuit rights over land use and governance (Campbell et al., 2011). On the other hand, in Greenland, the 2009 Self-Government Act transferred some powers from Denmark to the Greenlandic government, which included control over natural resources (Kuokkanen, 2021). These historical points reflect broader efforts by Inuit to gain control over environmental governance.

4.1.2 Interviews

The complete analysis with codes, initial themes and final themes, can be found in Appendix B.

Cultural and ecological connection

This theme focuses on how the Pikialasorsuaq is not only viewed by Inuit communities as a physical space, but also as a site of profound cultural, spiritual, and ecological connection. Sustainability, from this perspective, is not isolated into

environmental, social, or economic categories, as often found in Western sustainability models (Purvis et al., 2019); instead, it is understood as an interconnected way of life rooted in knowledge, land, and tradition. This reflects a form of epistemological pluralism, where different systems of knowing must be recognized in environmental governance.

In the report, the Commission often includes direct quotes from Inuit community members who describe the significance of the Pikialasorsuaq. For them, it is not just a polynya—it is their livelihood. It provides food through hunting and fishing, as well as resources for making tools and clothing. It is also an essential habitat for many species.

“Inuit [...] have recognized the area as critical habitat for many migratory species upon which they depend for their food security as well as cultural and spiritual connections.”
(Pikialasorsuaq Commission, 2017, p. VIII)

Some describe the land and sea ice as embedded in their daily lives and well-being, both physically and mentally:

“It is our life. It is just the way we live off animals, birds, and fish. [...] And when we go out on the land, out on the ice, or camping, fishing, it is our way of being healthy. Mentally healthy and overall.” (Pikialasorsuaq Commission, 2017, p. 11)

The polynya is an integral part of a way of life. The Inuit describe a deep relationship with the land they inhabit, where everything is interconnected. To truly understand the environment, one must live there and adapt to the land’s resources:

“It should also be understood that if you want to adapt to the land where you are living, you need to live off the food that this land is providing you with, and that is exactly why people have lived and survived by.” (Pikialasorsuaq Commission, 2017, p. 6)

This lived experience is also how knowledge is passed down. It is not just observational, but generational and spiritual:

“This knowledge has developed over thousands of years hunting, fishing, and traveling across the region.” (Pikialasorsuaq Commission, 2017, p. 22)

The report therefore makes it clear that Pikialasorsuaq is not only environmentally significant, but also culturally and spiritually vital to the Inuit communities that live around it. When Inuit speak of the land and water, they do not separate entities. Everything is interconnected and has meaning in relation to everything else, including animals, ancestors, and future generations.

This theme supports the overall argument of this thesis by demonstrating that sustainability, for Inuit, is inseparable from cultural survival and ethical relationships with the environment. Here, we see a holistic epistemology, rooted in practice, responsibility, and spiritual continuity.

Inuit culture is deeply rooted in the land and its natural environment, drawing on traditional knowledge and wisdom. For example, in Nunavut, there is a knowledge system called Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit (IQ), which emphasizes the interconnectedness of people, animals, and the land (Nunavut Impact Review Board, n.d.)

Environmental change and outside threats

In the report, the added quotes from Inuit interviewees focus on the direct threats to the environmental issues that affect the Pikialasorsuaq and the way of life for the Inuit communities:

"Now that giant ships will pass through the waters, the area of sea will be 'too small' for both wildlife and the huge ships." (Pikialasorsuaq Commission, 2017, p. 12)

The Inuit interviews indicate that they do not want shipping to be in the area, as they believe it disrupts their way of life, and there is no room for them there. Some even express that there is a need to prohibit shipping to make sure the land and the people are protected:

"I think if we are to be successful in protecting the area, the shipping should be prohibited in the future." (p. 13)

They are also concerned about climate change, and how it is going to affect the area:

"But today there is climate change and I am aware of that since the Greenlandic people who are our fellow Inughuit do not travel here anymore." (Pikialasorsuaq Commission, 2017, p. 9).

These concerns are not only rooted in the environmental changes that are happening and altering the Pikialasorsuaq. However, it has a negative impact on hunting for food, which also makes their culture suffer:

"Those are our arctic chars that we eat, and if only a small amount of oil is leaked, those are the species that we would lose forever." (Pikialasorsuaq Commission, 2017, p. 12)

The emphasis on "our" shows this connection, that the Inuit interviewee has to the animals that live in the Polynya, and therefore gives it a sense of connection to it. Mostly, when the Inuit interviewees discuss tourism, shipping, or development, their biggest concern is not to disrupt the land, the animals, and their way of life.

However, some of the interviewees also acknowledge that economic development can be beneficial, but only under the right conditions.

"As far as I know, if our land and our animals were not affected too much, then we would agree on the proposed economic activities." (Pikialasorsuaq Commission, 2017, p. 15)

It reflects the complexity within Inuit perspectives upon sustainability, and that there is not one true meaning of it.

Climate change has led to increasingly unpredictable weather, and the environment in the Arctic has worsened, directly impacting Inuit communities. Melting and thinning of the ice have led to animal migration, which disrupts hunting practices and can therefore pose risks to food security and cultural preservation. (The Guardian, 2018).

4.2 Pikialasorsuaq Leaders' statement, April. 2019

This Leader's Statement was written in 2019 and is accessible on the webpage of the Pikialasorsuaq Commission (Pikialasorsuaq Commission, 2019). It is issued by Inuit leaders from Greenland and Nunavut through the Commission. The statement builds on the recommendations presented in the 2017 report and emphasizes the need for Inuit-led monitoring. It also focuses on partnerships and collaborations with the Canadian and Danish Governments to ensure the management strategies. The complete analysis with codes, initial themes and final themes, can be found in Appendix C.

Governance and knowledge blending

This theme has been developed, as it describes how Inuit leaders call for collaboration with governments to protect the Pikialasorsuaq.

“Today, for the benefit of Inuit Nunangat and all Canadians, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and Inuit leaders commit to working in partnership together, and with the Governments of Denmark and Kalaallit Nunaat, to develop a path forward for advancing the sustainable marine management and environmental protection of the Pikialasorsuaq region, and to facilitate mobility for Inuit of the region.” (Pikialasorsuaq Commission, 2019, ¶7)

The statements also emphasize the importance of integrating Indigenous and Western knowledge systems into decision-making processes.

“Planning will be founded upon systems developed during the establishment of other Arctic marine protected areas as well as evidence-based Indigenous and Western knowledge [...]” (Pikialasorsuaq Commission, 2019, ¶7)

This theme of collaboration and working together is mentioned multiple times throughout the statement, and the leaders who have written this statement underscore that it will be important to protect and safeguard Pikialasorsuaq successfully. They also believe it will open up other future opportunities for collaborations. Interestingly, although this leader's statement follows the report made by the Pikialasorsuaq commission, it has a higher focus on showcasing how Inuit should work together with governments, rather than emphasizing Inuit self-determination, a prominent theme in the 2017 report. The explanation for this could be that the leader's statement is something presented to the public and serves as the outward voice of the Pikialasorsuaq Commission. For it to be easier to “digest”, they focus a lot on blending knowledge with others.

Blending systems of knowledge can be empowering, but can also be risky, as it could reinforce power imbalances if Inuit perspectives are not genuinely included. It is therefore important, as it addresses the implementation of epistemological pluralism.

Inuit-led projects sometimes face challenges when negotiating their authority within state structures, and often have to work with national systems that do not reflect their ways of knowing. In Greenland, Inuit have more control over internal matters due to their self-government arrangement (Gad, 2017). Even though these developments show progress, there are still some power imbalances behind, especially in how Indigenous knowledge is sometimes just „invited“ into Western structures (Aikenhead & Michell, 2011). Epistemological pluralism is about equal legitimacy of knowledge, but it is not always achieved in practice. Therefore, when Inuit voices are included in formal agreements, such as the Leaders' Statement, it is essential to recognize that their inclusion may have some underlying colonial power structures.

Cultural and ecological connection

This theme explores the cultural and ecological connection between Inuit communities and the Pikialasorsuaq, not just as a physical space, but also as a cultural symbol.

“The Pikialasorsuaq influence and importance extend to an even larger cultural and ecological region than the boundaries of the ever-changing polynya, supporting globally significant wildlife populations.” (Pikialasorsuaq Commission, 2019, ¶2)

The statement describes it as an ecologically local place, where wildlife can live freely, and it is where Inuit communities gather food. It is therefore also described as a vital part for Inuit, as they depend on the polynya. Many of their identity and cultural practices are deeply embedded in it.

“It has supported Inuit of the region for millennia; as a food source through harvesting, and as a travel route connecting Inuit communities.” (Pikialasorsuaq Commission, 2019, ¶2)

These statements demonstrate that Inuit communities possess a holistic understanding of sustainability, where everything is interconnected and interdependent. This means that cultural identity, survival, and biodiversity are interconnected. The theme highlights the importance of acknowledging Inuit knowledge systems that are grounded in experience, tradition, and spiritual connection.

This theme also supports the research aim, as it shows that Inuit sustainability cannot be categorized solely within the non-Inuit sustainability frameworks of economic, social, and environmental approaches. There is also a need for a cultural perspective, which recognizes that all the paradigms are interconnected and dependent on each other.

Environmental and development threats

This theme explores how the leader's statement, including the pressures of climate change, will have an environmental impact on the area, as well as the economic development occurring in the Arctic.

The statement highlights that climate change is threatening the Pikialasorsuaq, indicating that the ecosystems are undergoing changes, which will consequently pose risks to the biodiversity of the Polynya and the Inuit communities surrounding it.

“Now, the Pikialasorsuaq and the Inuit that depend on it are facing possible threats of climate and environmental change and increased human activity.” (Pikialasorsuaq Commission, 2019, ¶2)

They also point out that these climate changes are making new areas accessible in the Arctic, which means there will be increased human activity in these regions.

“Easier accessibility to the area and its resources from the effects of climate change is expected to increase the amount of fishing, shipping, tourism, and development in this region.” (Pikialasorsuaq Commission, 2019, ¶3)

While the statement acknowledges that economic developments will be beneficial, it also stresses the need for Inuit involvement in governing them. This shows that these threats are not only environmental but also political, as these rises in economic benefits could overlook the wishes of Inuit communities.

The ice in the Arctic is retreating due to climate change, making new areas and routes accessible for oil exploration, commercial shipping, and tourism. These activities offer economic possibilities, but could also pose as a threat to Indigenous peoples who live and gather food (Ford et al., 2012). These changes are therefore not only ecological but also cultural, as they can threaten food security for Inuit communities.

Global sustainability frameworks and community concerns

This theme examines how international conservation goals, as outlined in the Convention on Biological Diversity, intersect with the needs and lived realities of Inuit communities. The statement places the Pikialasorsuaq within a broader international network, as it references the global biodiversity targets and protected areas.

“The Conference of the Parties [...] adopted a Strategic Plan for Biodiversity for the 2011-2020 period, which called for Protection of coastal and marine areas, especially areas of particular importance for biodiversity and ecosystem, through effectively and equitably

managed, ecologically representative and well-connected systems of protected areas and other effective area-based conservation methods.” (Pikialasorsuaq Commission, 2019, ¶1)

However, for Inuit communities, sustainability is not just about meeting external goals that are set out, but it is their livelihood. For them, securing food and cultural survival is crucial, and it is about achieving long-term resilience.

”Inuit communities in Nunavut, Canada, and Kalaallit Nunaat, which are closely associated with the Pikialasorsuaq, have expressed concerns about food security in the region, as a matter of survival, and have also expressed concerns regarding the future of the Pikialasorsuaq.” (Pikialasorsuaq Commission, 2019, ¶3)

It shows that there is the same wish from both the Inuit and non-Inuit sides to protect the Pikialasorsuaq. However, it also shows that the reasons behind it are different. The way it is presented, the non-Inuit frameworks focus more on meeting international quotas, whereas Inuit communities view this as their way of life. This becomes especially clear in the way state-led language appears in the document. For example, the phrase:

„This initiative will support strong Inuit communities through the protection of the environment and preserving the biodiversity of this unique region“ (Pikialasorsuaq Commission, 2019, ¶8)

It positions the Inuit as passive recipients of state action, rather than actual leaders. Even though they use words such as “partnership” and “self-determination”, the phrasing still suggests that it is the government that is managing the process, and Inuit are included within the structure. It therefore reveals some tension between what is said and how the postcolonial language gives meaning. It raises questions whether it reflects actual, genuine

epistemological pluralism, or if Inuit participation is shaped to fit non-Inuit governance norms.

The biodiversity targets and global marine protection frameworks of the United Nations are increasingly influencing the shaping of Arctic policy (UNEP, 2011). When international goals are imposed without adaptation to Inuit knowledge, they risk reproducing colonial governance, even if it is well-intentioned. This theme reflects this tension between global environmental narratives and Inuit realities.

Inuit governance, sovereignty, and leadership

This theme brings together statements that advocate for Inuit leadership in managing the Pikialasorsuaq. This theme is reflected in a strong postcolonial stance, which asserts that Inuit, not just included, must lead governance. However, many of the phrases in the Leaders' Statement seem to frame Inuit communities as if it is supported by the government or are allowed by the state. Rather than it being initiated by Inuit communities themselves:

“[...] to advance Canada's commitment to a renewed relationship with Inuit, one based on the recognition of rights, respect, co-operation, and partnership.” (Pikialasorsuaq Commission, 2019, ¶6)

Here, the Canadian Government is mentioned first, which frames it as the initiator, rather than something that is a result of Inuit demand. This is very different from the report written by the Pikialasorsuaq commission, as they are clear in their wish for Inuit governance.

“Reconciliation and self-determination are key to this government's commitment to Inuit and establishing Inuit leadership in the Pikialasorsuaq supports this goal.” (Pikialasorsuaq Commission, 2019, ¶8)

These phrases position the Canadian government as the primary actor. If they are offering Inuit leadership, rather than it being something that has been negotiated, it undermines the idea of true sovereignty.

“Inuit participation in marine management is needed to ensure the sustainable development and protection of the area and its resources.” (Pikialasorsuaq Commission, 2019, ¶3)

Here, they write “participation,” which implies involvement, but not necessarily authority. In contrast, the only phrase that centers Inuit priorities is:

“[...] the Pikialasorsuaq Commission issued a report in November 2017 identifying overarching objectives that Inuit from Nunavut, Canada, and Kalaallit Nunaat seek to achieve; including the need for Inuit management and monitoring of the Pikialasorsuaq, and easier mobility for Inuit between Canada and Kalaallit Nunaat.” (Pikialasorsuaq Commission, 2019, ¶5)

This represents a rare instance in the document where Inuit goals and leadership are described on their terms. This theme supports the research question by exploring Inuit self-determination within the context of sustainability discourse. Postcolonial theory highlights the struggle for sovereignty and how the language of inclusion may still reflect underlying power imbalances.

The call for Inuit self-determination comes from a long history of exclusion from land, resources, and state policies. Despite the creation of Nunavut, absolute power over policy and development often remains in federal structures, which limits Inuit influence (Kuokkanen, 2021).

In Greenland, despite the 2009 Self-Government Act granting greater autonomy, the Danish state continues to exert significant influence over key decisions regarding resource extraction (Kuokkanen, 2021).

Mobility, culture, and border challenges

This theme encompasses statements or phrases that highlight how mobility across the Píkiilasorsuaq has become a challenge and how it is deeply rooted in culture and familiarity. It has linked communities across Canada and Greenland, but the increase in security has limited this connection.

Travel across the Píkiilasorsuaq by sea ice, open water, or by air has helped sustain strong family, cultural, and trade connections between Inuit in Nunavut, Canada, and Kalaallit Nunaat.” (Píkiilasorsuaq Commission, 2019, ¶4)

This issue has been highlighted here and in the 2017 report, indicating that it is one of the more significant concerns for Inuit communities. This highlights the importance of cultural sustainability for Inuit communities and reflects the broader political and historical forces that shape what sustainable living means for them.

The Arctic has historically been a borderless homeland for the Inuit, allowing them to move freely across regions that are now divided by national boundaries. Today, there is an increase in international laws, as well as cost barriers that limit cross-border travel, even between closely related communities in Nunavut and Greenland (Píkiilasorsuaq Commission, 2017).

Maintaining mobility is not only a logistical issue, but it is also a matter of cultural sustainability, as well as preserving language and shared traditions.

4.3 Pikialasorsuaq Commission Press release May 2018

The press release from May 2018 was issued by the Pikialasorsuaq commission to announce the publication of its 2017 report (Pikialasorsuaq Commission, 2018). The press release follows a more formal tone of voice, but remains very similar in content to the original press release. They followed the recommendation made by the commission, which they are important and has a focus on Inuit self-determination. The complete analysis with codes, initial themes and final themes, can be found in Appendix D.

Governance and knowledge blending

This theme encompasses how the press release envisions how the recommendations should be governed, which incorporates various epistemological perspectives. As the Leaders' Statement highlights, Inuit experts, the government, and other stakeholders need to collaborate to ensure the future of Pikialasorsuaq.

“During the workshop, it was clear that there is support from the academic and government research communities, as well as local governments, for collaboration between Inuit living in the area. It produced an implementation framework for management options that brings together local knowledge experts, Governments, scientific research, and NGOs for a shared and sustainable management model for this great region.” (Pikialasorsuaq Commission, 2018, ¶9)

This phrase reflects a blended approach that brings together different communities and knowledge systems to find the best working solution for Pikialasorsuaq.

“Participants discussed the current governance of the Pikialasorsuaq, existing monitoring and research programs among many other issues.” (Pikialasorsuaq Commission, 2018, ¶4)

This theme also resonates with the theory of epistemological pluralism, as it illustrates how diverse actors with different knowledge systems are brought together. However, a postcolonial theory also reminds us that collaboration does not mean equality. By blending knowledge and governance, there is a potential threat that Inuit knowledge could be reduced to a supporting role. This theme, therefore, contributes to the analysis by showing how sustainability can reinforce or challenge existing power structures.

The Arctic has become an increasingly important venue for international cooperation, where various global actors aim to protect ecosystems while balancing sovereignty and Indigenous rights (Koivurova, 2010). Inuit communities are frequently “invited” to environmental governance, but often the frameworks used are shaped by the state and international institutions.

This raises concerns about tokenism and unequal power, as blind knowledge systems do not always equate to shared authority (Nadasdy, 1999).

Cultural identity, preservation, and mobility

This theme encompasses phrases that highlight not only the ecological significance of Pikialasorsuaq, but also, as the other Pikialasorsuaq documents have described, its cultural meaning for the Inuit Communities. It is a living cultural space:

"The Pikialasorsuaq is not just an ocean, or a unique wildlife area impacted by climate change. This is our home, our Nuna. This shared body of water defines who we are as people – it connects us." (Pikialasorsuaq Commission, 2018, ¶2)

Not being able to travel across the polynya is one of the biggest concerns among Inuit communities, and the press release emphasizes this:

"Removing travel barriers for people living in the communities adjacent to Pikialasorsuaq was at the heart of the Commission's work." (Pikialasorsuaq Commission, 2018, ¶6)

It is not only tied to being able to travel, but it is also a means to maintain cultural practices, visit family, and preserve their language. It is deeply rooted in cultural sustainability.

"We travelled freely between our communities and not being able to visit family because cost and documents are hard on our communities – we are one people."
(Pikialasorsuaq Commission, 2018, ¶7)

"Communities on both sides of the Pikialasorsuaq asked for free mobility between their communities to visit family and friends, preserve our language and cultural ties."
(Pikialasorsuaq Commission, 2018, ¶7)

This theme, therefore, emphasizes that sustainability also encompasses cultural practices and how to maintain them, and thus demonstrates that some perspectives of sustainability have a cultural foundation.

Inuit sovereignty and leadership

Like the report from the Pikialasorsuaq commission, this press release also strongly emphasizes Inuit leadership when managing the region. The Commission is responding directly to communities and calls for Inuit-led governance:

"The Commission is responding to the communities, who have called for greater local stewardship of this shared marine region through an Inuit Management Authority, and an

Inuit-led monitoring regime, and through free mobility to travel across the Pikialasorsuaq."

(Pikialasorsuaq Commission, 2018, ¶3)

They promote that local communities should manage the area:

"Importantly, communities from the Pikialasorsuaq spoke to community priorities that will define the implementation of the Commission's work to manage and monitor the area, to lead in its conservation, and to promote local involvement in scientific research in the region." (Pikialasorsuaq Commission, 2018, ¶5)

This reflects a postcolonial theory, where Inuit governance should not only be included but also be at the center. The press release showcases that it is fundamental for the initiative and should not be a secondary consideration.

Furthermore, the commission recommends this Inuit-led leadership to be a guide for other types of Indigenous stewardship:

"The work of the Pikialasorsuaq Commission may be a global model for Indigenous stewardship and supports the concept of self-determination and Indigenous Protected Areas." (Pikialasorsuaq Commission, 2018, ¶10)

This theme therefore aligns with the problem formulation, as it shows that Inuit knowledge and Inuit-led policies should be centered when concerning sustainability initiatives that directly affect the Inuit.

4.4 VOICE resolution – "Advancing the Willow Project to Ensure a Stable Economic Foundation for North Slope Residents and Communities"

This document is an official resolution made by the organization Voice of the Arctic Inupiat and was released on November 3, 2022 (Voice of the Arctic Inupiat, 2023). The key

points in the resolution are that VOICE shows its support for the Willow Project and states that it will be a way to gain economic benefits, thereby ensuring cultural preservation. It also emphasizes the historical importance of self-determination and the Iñupiat's long history of economic, cultural, and ecological interdependence. The complete analysis with codes, initial themes and final themes, can be found in Appendix E.

Economic sustainability and cultural continuity

This theme emphasizes that for the Iñupiat in the North Slope, economic development is a necessity for sustaining communities and is also not separate from cultural survival. The resolution argues that development, in the form of resource extraction, can provide jobs, infrastructure, and help fund local services.

"[...] the region and communities benefit from responsible development on the North Slope, though, among other things, continued strengthening of the Borough's tax base, employment opportunities across the North Slope entities, contracting opportunities for the tribes and Alaska Native corporations..." (Voice of the Arctic Iñupiat, 2023, ¶11)

The resolution also ties it to the Willow Project and states that it will be a source of economic sustainability within the region.

"[...] recognize the need by the Biden Administration to advance the Willow Project further to support the economic foundation of the North Slope region and ensure the sustainability and viability of its eight communities and the Iñupiaq culture." (Voice of the Arctic Iñupiat, 2023, ¶12)

VOICE therefore sees this development as essential to survival, rather than it being a threat. For them, the Willow project aligns with economic sustainability, a concept often found in non-Inuit sustainability frameworks, particularly in the three-pillar approach.

Sustainability, therefore, job opportunities, economic benefits, and gaining autonomy. It therefore also shows that it goes beyond just the economic sustainability, but also intertwines with social sustainability, as it is for the well-being of their community.

This both challenges the non-Inuit sustainability models, which focus on environmental conservation; however, it also aligns with them, as there is a high emphasis on economic sustainability.

This view is not entirely different from that of some Indigenous communities, as for some communities, economic development is tied to the survival and preservation of their culture, as insufficient infrastructure and high costs of living can pose significant challenges (Wilson, 2020). Therefore, projects like Willow can be seen as a necessary way to ensure these aspects (Wilson, 2020).

Protecting nature and traditional ways of life

This theme highlights how the Iñupiat of the North Slope understand sustainability as a balance between protecting the environment and continuing their traditional ways of life. In the resolution, they write that Iñupiat have relied on the sea and land to survive and to sustain their culture.

"[...] the North Slope Iñupiat have adapted to thrive in the Arctic, living off the aquatic and land resources to sustain their lifestyle, traditions, and culture." (Voice of the Arctic Iñupiat, 2023, ¶7)

The Inuit community is deeply connected to the land, a connection that reflects their cultural identity. Their approach to the land is characterized by observation, respect, and responsibility. They have lived in the land for many years and therefore know it well. The

resolution highlights the need for an extraction idea that respects both the land and its inhabitants. And therefore again, balancing the environment, but also balancing development

"[...] developing local content and responses concerning activities within the region that allow for protection of the lands, waters, and subsistence resources used by the Arctic Iñupiat for thousands of years." (Voice of the Arctic Iñupiat, 2023, ¶3)

This aligns with an Inuit view on sustainability. It is viewed as a cultural identity, encompassing the use of the land for resources to survive, for hunting, and in protecting the land, as well as the potential for economic sustainability. Everything is tied together and intertwined. From a theoretical perspective, this theme aligns well with epistemological pluralism, as it highlights different ways of understanding what sustainability entails.

This theme supports the problem formulation, as it provides another insight into how Inuit view sustainability, not only in the context of environmental protection, but also in a way that respects the land and the sea.

Governance and representation

In this theme, it is highlighted that the Iñupiat in the North Slope have a desire for self-governance and self-determination. This also includes a desire to be active and engaged in discussions concerning the Arctic.

"[...] promote the social welfare of the Iñupiaq people [...] including [...] developing local advocacy and engagement [...] to state, federal and international forums addressing Arctic issues." (Voice of the Arctic Iñupiat, 2023, ¶1)

In the resolution, VOICE emphasizes that there is a need for Inuit representation, both within government decision-making and externally.

"[...] acting to protect the interests of the Arctic Iñupiat." (Voice of the Arctic Iñupiat, 2023, ¶4)

"[...] and being a conduit for information transfer with outside organizations, including both governmental and non-governmental entities." (Voice of the Arctic Iñupiat, 2023, ¶6)

This theme, therefore, connects to the problem formulation, as it shows how Inuit governance is framed not only as a desire to be included in internal decision-making, but also in broader international frameworks. It reflects a postcolonial theme, as shown, that the Inuit want to be visible and have a genuine voice in sustainability decisions, thereby reaffirming the role of self-determination. The North Slope Borough, established in 1972, has provided a unique framework for Indigenous governance over land use (Case & Voluck, 2012).

By doing this, the communities were able to collect funds from oil companies, which could support various issues, such as funding for schools, healthcare, and housing. It was a significant step toward self-determination because it allowed the Iñupiat to make their own decisions.

Self-determination and political history

This theme centers around how the Iñupiat's support for the Willow project is linked to their history of political activism. The document recalls how the North Slope Iñupiat were the only ones who protested against a major law called the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act (ANCSA), and this resistance helped create their government, the North Slope Borough.

"[...] the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act (ANCSA) had one voice of opposition, the North Slope Iñupiat." (Voice of the Arctic Iñupiat, 2023, ¶8)

"[...] the region's opposition to ANCSA spurred the creation of the North Slope Borough... an act of Iñupiat self-determination." (Voice of the Arctic Iñupiat, 2023, ¶9)

By adding this, it demonstrates that VOICE is not succumbing to outside pressure on this project; instead, they have consistently fought for their own decisions and self-determination.

This connects to postcolonial theory because it demonstrates how the Inuit take control and leadership through their own decisions and are not influenced by outside pressures.

The Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act (ANCSA) was an American law passed in 1971 to settle land disputes with Alaska Native people. It provided Native communities with money and land; however, it also required them to relinquish their traditional land claims (Case & Voluck, 2012). Many Inuit, especially the North Slope Iñupiat, opposed this law, as they believed it did not reflect Indigenous values, which led them to form the North Slope Borough (Case & Voluck, 2012). This history shapes how self-determination is understood and underscores postcolonial claims to define development locally and decide for themselves.

4.5 Interview with VOICE - “Exploring the Willow Project in Alaska: An Interview with Voice of the Arctic Iñupiat”

The interview was published on the website of Global LIS on 20th April 2023, written by Hana Mohar and Katja Slapar Ljubutin. The interviewee is a representative from VOICE, an organization that advocates for the interests of its members (Mohar & Slapar Ljubutin, 2023). The representative explains that VOICE is supporting the willow project and emphasizes its importance for self-determination and economic benefits. The interview also responds directly to criticism of VOICE’s support of the project by saying that they should

listen to the native voices of Alaska, as the project aligns with their values. The complete analysis with codes, initial themes and final themes, can be found in Appendix F.

Economic sustainability and cultural continuity

In this first theme from the Interview with Voice of the Arctic Iñupiat, it shows how VOICE views the Willow project as essential to securing the economic stability and, therefore, the survival of the Iñupiat culture. In the interview, it is highlighted that this development is not just for economic benefits, but the culture is also dependent on it.

"The Willow Project represents the long-term economic well-being of the North Slope Iñupiat." (Mohar & Slapar Ljubutin, 2023, ¶3)

"The project ensures a viable future for our communities, generating economic stability for generations to come, and advancing our self-determination as Alaska Natives." (Mohar & Slapar Ljubutin, 2023, ¶3)

They argue that this project can help communities gain self-determination and generate jobs, tax revenue, and funding for social services. All of this will enable the Inuit communities to remain on their ancestral lands.

"...more than \$1 billion in property taxes... will help to provide basic, yet essential, services like education, police, fire protection..." (Mohar & Slapar Ljubutin, 2023, ¶4)

"...help secure our communities' future... allowing us to continue practicing and strengthening our traditions..." (Mohar & Slapar Ljubutin, 2023, ¶9)

From VOICE, they are very convinced that this is not only an economic opportunity in terms of monetary gains, but rather a way to sustain their culture. It therefore overlaps with

some of the sustainability pillars, specifically economic sustainability and cultural sustainability. As shown here, VOICE recognizes that sustainability is holistic and everything is interconnected. Both aspects are very intertwined and therefore challenge the non-Inuit view that these pillars are separate.

The arguments from VOICE both support the theme of epistemological pluralism, as they demonstrate different ways of understanding sustainability and how to handle knowledge. It also reflects postcolonial theory, as they strongly articulate their form of development, which may contradict outside interests or opinions.

Since the Arctic Alaska located more remotely, it presents some challenges in terms of infrastructure, which, as mentioned, makes it desirable to gain economic opportunities (Wilson, 2020). This makes it especially desirable for Iñupiat, as they are able to receive economic benefits while still staying on ancestral land.

Governance and representation

In this theme, VOICE represents itself as an authoritative voice for the Inuit in the Arctic North Slope. They are advocating to get local benefits, but also to make their voices heard in national and regional discussions.

"Our twenty-four member organizations work collaboratively to ensure the Arctic Slope's collective voice is heard locally, regionally, and nationally." (Mohar & Slapar Ljubutin, 2023, ¶1)

"VOICE serves to protect the interests of the Arctic Slope Iñupiat by providing local advocacy and engagement;" (Mohar & Slapar Ljubutin, 2023, ¶1)

In the document, VOICE frames that it is essential to ensure that Iñupiat's viewpoints and voices are not overshadowed or marginalized.

"We urge outside activists to listen to Alaska Native voices..." (Mohar & Slapar Ljubutin, 2023, ¶7)

"We ensure our communities are heard by speaking with a unified voice..." (Mohar & Slapar Ljubutin, 2023, ¶10)

This theme directly connects to postcolonial theory, as it demonstrates that VOICE aims to empower Inuit communities in the North Slope to have a voice in the discussion and reflects how governance should encompass not only inclusion but also leadership and representation.

Protecting nature and traditional ways of life

Even though that VOICE in the Interview is voicing their deep support of the Willow project, they also have some environmental considerations. They emphasize the importance of protecting the land and traditional values, and state that the development of the Willow project and the protection of cultural traditions are not mutually exclusive. If that were the case, then they would not agree to support the project.

"Willow has been designed to protect our traditional subsistence activities while providing economic opportunities..." (Mohar & Slapar Ljubutin, 2023, ¶6)

"We know that Willow can coexist with our traditions and would not support it otherwise." (Mohar & Slapar Ljubutin, 2023, ¶8)

Again, they are also showing that sustainability can intertwine, and different pillars in the non-Inuit viewpoint are not true.

"...resource development and our subsistence way of life are not mutually exclusive."
(Mohar & Slapar Ljubutin, 2023, ¶7)

"Understanding and embracing that interdependence is paramount to the longevity of North Slope Iñupiaq culture and traditions." (Mohar & Slapar Ljubutin, 2023, ¶8)

By saying this, they argue that economic benefits will ensure the preservation of their culture and create independence. Furthermore, the Willow project, despite being aware that some criticize its environmental aspects, can still be sustainable for the land.

Self-determination and political history

Throughout the interview, it is frequently mentioned that the Willow project could offer a potential avenue for self-determination among the North Slope Iñupiat.

"The economic benefits derived from Willow will go far in advancing Iñupiat self-determination." (Mohar & Slapar Ljubutin, 2023, ¶9)

"VOICE has worked tirelessly to empower our communities and advance the self-determination of our people." (Mohar & Slapar Ljubutin, 2023, ¶9)

It is noticeable here that this phrase not only focuses on the economic advantages this project could bring, but also on its political implications. In this phrase, VOICE presents itself in a way that makes them not just a passive recipient of oil developments, but also an active player in the decision-making process, which could therefore shape their future.

"Alaska's North Slope Iñupiat should – and ultimately did – play an important role in the process around Willow..." (Mohar & Slapar Ljubutin, 2023, ¶9)

It therefore strongly reflects postcolonial theory, as the Iñupiat not only want to be included and seen as active participants, but they are also playing an active role in their development. They do not want to be spoken for, and they are reclaiming political sovereignty through this project.

4.6 Willow Project's Record of Decision, Sovereign Iñupiat For a Living Arctic Press Response (SILA)

The press release was published by the Iñupiat organization SILA on March 13, 2023. They released it as a response to the approval of the Willow project, expressing their disappointment with the US government, particularly after years of protests against oil development in the North Slope Arctic (SILA, 2023). The emphasis is on how these issues have gained widespread recognition, and many others have joined the opposition. SILA believes that the oil extractions will harm the local communities close to it. The complete analysis with codes, initial themes and final themes, can be found in Appendix G.

Environmental justice and local harm

This theme encompasses how SILA believes the Willow Project is a direct violation of environmental justice, and it is particularly devastating to the Iñupiat community of Nuisquit. In their press release, SILA begins with the disappointment of the project's approval, despite many years of protests from Inuit communities.

"Early Monday morning, the Biden Administration approved the development of the Willow Master Development Plan. This great disappointment comes after years of

grassroots, Iñupiaq-led opposition, especially from the community most impacted, Nuiqsut."
(SILA, 2023, ¶1)

They point out that it is documented that not only will it harm the environment, but it will also cause harm to the communities in Nuiqsut, affecting their physical and mental health.

"The Bureau of Land Management acknowledges... it will have a disproportionate adverse effect on Nuiqsut's health, subsistence, and sociocultural systems." (SILA, 2023, ¶3)

In this theme, SILA clearly states that it is entirely against the interests and well-being of Inuit communities, and their voice has been marginalized, even though there have been many protests. This contrasts significantly with VOICE, which has a strongly pro-opinion towards the Willow project. It also reflects postcolonialism, as it suggests that Inuit voices have not been heard and, therefore, marginalized.

Nuiqsut is where Iñupiat communities are located near the Willow project, and they have been very vocal about their opposition to it (Guardian, 2023). For Indigenous communities, environmental justice often means protecting themselves from unfair harm caused by large projects that are approved by the state (Scheidel et al., 2023). This gives context to SILA's concerns, as the Willow project reflects historical patterns.

Local and global environmental solidarity

Sila also mentions that the opposition towards the Willow project is not something they are sharing. However, it is the movement in both Alaska and globally that demonstrates that the environmental concerns they have proposed, which are shared by both Inuit and non-Inuit communities worldwide.

"With the support of millions worldwide, Willow went from predominantly an Alaska-based issue to a global concern within weeks..." (SILA, 2023, ¶2)

This international solidarity helps elevate the voices of smaller communities and illustrates the deep connection between climate issues across regions.

There is an emerging form of global environmental activism that opposes Arctic drilling projects, such as the Willow project. In recent years, a stronger coalition has emerged between local and global movements (SILA, 2023) SILA's emphasis on global solidarity demonstrates how global movements can enhance local resistance.

Sustainability and the climate crisis

This reflects how the press release not only focuses on the environmental harm of the project but also the broader critique of fossil fuel dependency, calling for systemic change.

"We condemn the continued prioritization of profit over climate and people." (SILA, 2023, ¶4)

"The only reasonable solution to climate change is the divestment from all fossil fuels and a Just Transition into renewable energy." (SILA, 2023, ¶8)

The mention that it might be challenging to transition is more about moral responsibility.

"Yes, it will be hard to transition... But there is no greater price to pay than the loss of biodiversity, coastlines, and lives." (SILA, 2023, ¶9)

SILA's position shows that there is a shift in the framing of sustainability, not only about the extraction but also to transition away from fossil fuels entirely. The call for „Just

Transition “ is rooted in the critics of monetary frameworks, which have to address the long-term preservation of the planet (Newell & Mulvaney, 2013). It is therefore also about a structural change, to move towards more ethical accountability.

Ethics and intergenerational responsibility

This theme is centered around spiritual accountability and mourning, where it frames the land, water, and animals as relatives whose well-being is deeply tied to human responsibility.

"We mourn for our animal relatives who cannot speak or ask for protection..." (SILA, 2023, ¶7)

It also challenges materialism and redefines what wealth is.

"Wealth is not what is in bank accounts, it is what we can provide for the environment around us and one another..." (SILA, 2023, ¶10)

The theme reflects that sustainability is deeply rooted in both ecological factors and spiritual aspects. That everything connects, and animals are relatives, and the land is not just lived in, but also alive itself.

"A Just Transition is setting the intentions to be a good ancestor and good relative to each other and the land and water." (SILA, 2023, ¶13)

In this phrase, SILA is also saying that the oil developments are not only about the harm they could potentially do today, but also how they will affect future generations in terms of climate change. They are therefore supporting a transition from fossil fuels, as they view it as a betrayal of future generations.

5. Discussion

In this section, the findings from the analysis will be discussed in relation to the three theoretical frameworks: postcolonialism, epistemological pluralism, and various types of sustainability. To address the problem formulation, the three sub-questions introduced in the Introduction section will serve as a guide for the discussion, which enables the formulation of a detailed conclusion.

The sub-questions are:

- I. How do documents from the Pikialasorsuaq project frame sustainability concerning Inuit knowledge, governance, and ecological protection?
- II. How do North Slope Inuit organizations articulate sustainability in the context of oil development concerning Inuit knowledge, governance, and ecological protection?
- III. In what ways do these Inuit understandings of sustainability compare with dominant non-Inuit sustainability discourses

5.1 How do documents from the Pikialasorsuaq project frame sustainability concerning Inuit knowledge, governance, and ecological protection?

In the report from the Pikialasorsuaq Commission, two types of voice are presented. As shown in the analysis, the first is the Commission's report, and the second comprises excerpts from interviews with Inuit communities in Greenland and Canada. The Commission's voice is formal and structured, reflecting that the report is directed toward governments, NGOs, and policy audiences. In contrast, the interview excerpts are more personal, grounded, and emotional, reflecting the lived experiences of individuals. This difference highlights contrasting approaches to what sustainability means and what should be sustained.

The Commission's voice places a strong emphasis on knowledge systems and self-governance. A central theme is the importance of Inuit knowledge not merely being included in research and initiatives in the Pikialasorsuaq region but leading them. There is a clear political ambition behind this positioning. By including voices from interviews in the report, the Commission also demonstrates that the reason for initiating sustainable initiatives is not just environmental, it is deeply cultural. The safeguarding of the polynya is not only about ecological preservation, but also about protecting the cultural practices, identities, and interconnections that are tied to it.

From the perspective of those interviewed, sustainability appears less political and more deeply rooted in everyday cultural identity. The Pikialasorsuaq is viewed not only as a source of food and survival but also as a vital space for maintaining connections across Inuit communities. The polynya facilitates relationships, shared traditions, and language retention. However, this is increasingly challenged by safety regulations and frameworks imposed by non-Inuit institutions, which make it more difficult to live according to traditional practices. From a sustainability pillar perspective, what is being expressed is a strong emphasis on cultural sustainability. Living off the land and passing knowledge through generations is central to this understanding. This differs somewhat from the Commission's voice, which, although it does acknowledge the importance of cultural well-being, is more focused on the political structures necessary to ensure Inuit authority and leadership over the region.

The Commission often emphasizes the importance of Inuit decision-making within governance and in monitoring the Pikialasorsuaq. They argue that Inuit are the people most affected by the changes happening in the region, and therefore should be the ones leading the initiatives and also deciding how to define sustainability. This perspective emphasizes the

right to self-determination and asserts that political authority must be established to preserve the environment and culture most effectively.

The Leaders' Statement from the Pikialasorsuaq Commission adopts a more official and diplomatic tone. Like the report, it emphasizes the importance of the Pikialasorsuaq to surrounding Inuit communities and notes how environmental changes threaten its sustainability. However, the Leaders' Statement places a greater emphasis on collaboration and partnership between Inuit communities and non-Inuit governments. They frequently use words such as "collaboration" and "partnership", which gives the impression that it is formulated to be a more diplomatic message, potentially read by governments. In comparison to the report, which goes deeper into the fact that Inuit should have more authority over the region, rather than just being consulted.

Therefore, the difference in tone could be because of the difference in the intended audience. A public statement from the Pikialasorsuaq Commission might need to show a willingness to cooperate with non-Inuit governments. From a postcolonial lens, this could be problematic. They might feel pressured to show that they are willing to collaborate, but this consequently weakens their political strength in claiming Inuit authority. So, even a document produced by Inuit might have some constraints due to the expectations of a colonial framework. Still, both documents, regardless of their tone, frame sustainability as both environmental and cultural, and also as political, making these aspects intertwined. By protecting the environment, it preserves culture, but it depends on political autonomy and the right to decide for themselves.

The press release adds another dimension to this framing. It focuses on how recommendations from the Commission have been implemented, emphasizing the success of these initiatives. While it also acknowledges contributions from governments and academic

experts, it credits Inuit leadership and knowledge as the key reasons for success. The press release positions the initiatives as a step towards Inuit self-determination, where they are decision-makers in key sustainability issues. It is concluded that the framework developed for Pikialasorsuaq could serve as a model for other sustainability initiatives involving Indigenous communities.

Just as in the other document, the press release focuses on the importance of the polynya. However, the most prominent perspective of sustainability is still about political aspects. This can be understood through the lens of postcolonial theory. Historically, Inuit communities have been subject to colonialism and have often been excluded from decision-making processes. Smith (1999) writes about how colonial systems have undermined Indigenous knowledge and turned them into passive roles, rather than active ones.

From this perspective, phrases from the Leaders' Statement, even though it is Inuit-produced, could still reflect a form of tokenism, as described by Tuck and Yang (2012). They argue that token inclusion of Indigenous perspective, which is framed as "collaboration," is not the same as decolonizing. For decolonization to be true, Indigenous communities must have the power to lead and define the initiatives that concern them. When examining the Pikialasorsuaq project, anything less than Inuit authority could risk reinforcing colonial structures.

That being said, all the sources discussed describe how the project is an Inuit initiative and represents a step towards decolonization and self-determination. Still, it is apparent that there is a need to establish and navigate these political relationships with non-Inuit governments, and it may also explain why some of the documents highlight collaboration. If it is a strategic decision or a limitation, it is open to interpretation, but it is very clear that sustainability is not simply environmental or economic; it is also political.

From a postcolonial perspective, this makes sense because without the authority to lead, Inuit communities are not able to protect their cultural, environmental, social, and economic sustainability. All the pillars depend on political sustainability, which makes it about self-determination. The documents reflect that the Pikialasorsuaq is not just about safeguarding the polynya, but about claiming the right to define what sustainability means, who gets to decide it, and how it should be practiced. The project is therefore transformed into a fight for political recognition and knowledge sovereignty, as well as environmental and cultural causes.

5.2 How do North Slope Inuit organizations articulate sustainability in the context of oil development concerning Inuit knowledge, governance, and ecological protection?

This thesis has examined two different Inuit perspectives on the Willow Project, as expressed by organizations in the North Slope of Alaska. From the first organization, VOICE, two documents are included, which advocate for the Willow project and emphasize the economic benefits, vital for the Iñupiat communities. They argue that oil development is not in conflict with cultural preservation; it is, in fact, the reason for it to happen. The documents highlight how healthcare, job opportunities, education, and community services will benefit from the project. Thus, framing the Willow project not only as a way to obtain economic sustainability but also to ensure social and cultural sustainability.

VOICE establishes a direct correlation between the survival of Iñupiat communities and the preservation of their culture. In this framing, sustainability is not environmental, but political, cultural, and economic. VOICE presents a holistic view of the Sustainability Pillars framework, where all pillars are interconnected and support one another.

VOICE also emphasizes the importance of political authority and highlights that support for the project is not influenced by external pressure, but rather a deliberate decision. This highly reflects a postcolonial dynamic, where Iñupiat claim the right to define development in their terms. So rather than seeing themselves as victims, they are expressing empowerment and self-determination. VOICE also argues that they know the limits of their land and claim that the development will not cause any harm to it.

In contrast, the press release from SILA offers a very different interpretation. It presents a more critical and holistic view of the Willow Project, beginning with an expression of disappointment at its approval. SILA emphasizes that the development will have deep emotional, spiritual, and ecological consequences. Their concerns are not only about environmental factors, but they express grief over the impact it might have on future generations, animals, land, and water. In their framing, sustainability is deeply rooted in ethics and moral responsibility, rather than any monetary or material gain. They do not see it as development, but question the logic behind it.

SILA's interpretation touches on the sustainability pillars of cultural, environmental, and social sustainability, but leaves out economic factors. In their interpretation, it is mentioned negatively, calling for a "Just Transition" to move away from fossil fuels and not profiting from them. In this view, they see it as a short-term gain that outweighs long-term survival, and in their framing, true sustainability must be based on care and responsibility for future generations.

These two perspectives are opposed to one another, where VOICE sees development as necessary for Iñupiat survival, and SILA views it as a threat.

When viewed through a postcolonial lens, these differences become more understandable. Some scholars might argue that VOICE's perspective reflects "colonization of the mind", where colonized communities adapt the viewpoint of the settlers. So, from this angle, if it were to be true decolonization, it would mean that development projects such as Willow should be rejected, and the arguments from SILA would be seen as a more "authentic" standpoint.

However, this way of thinking can risk oversimplifying and diminishing Inuit perspectives. Although postcolonial theory critiques the "colonization of the mind", it is crucial to acknowledge that Inuit perspectives are complex and diverse. They all differ between and among communities, and they encompass diverse opinions, including openness to development. So, to suggest that VOICE is reproducing colonial logic, overlooks the context and the lived experiences that have framed their position. This simplistic way of thinking could reinforce colonial thinking by saying that Inuit communities are not evolving.

Another way to interpret VOICE's position is by drawing back to Smith's (1999) demand for self-determination. The emphasis on economic and political sustainability could reflect a desire for greater authority over land and governance, which is similar to the Pikialsorsuaq initiative. Their argument could therefore be seen as a way of gaining control over how the development will look in their context.

The different perspectives could be explained through epistemological pluralism. If one accepts that there are multiple ways of knowing, then it follows that Inuit communities can have different conclusions, even within the same region. These documents present a plural set of different priorities, but each has its own set of reasoning. For some, sustainability means protecting the land from extractive industries, and for others, it is about ensuring that the land and its people can remain on their ancestral territory.

What the documents do share is a common concern of preserving culture and well-being, but in two different ways. Despite their differences, both VOICE and SILA's framing of sustainability concludes with the preservation of cultural sustainability. This comparison challenges the assumption that Inuit from the same communities or regions have the same understanding. It actively demonstrates that Inuit responses and perspectives on sustainability are just as relevant in their community as they would be in any other, and by recognizing this, it is not just an academic point, but also a political one. For sustainability policies to be flexible, they must include different ways of knowing and perspectives, instead of relying on one-size-fits-all approaches.

5.3 In what ways do these Inuit understandings of sustainability compare with dominant non-Inuit sustainability discourses?

These two cases of Inuit sustainability initiatives show that perspectives do not differ across Inuit communities in different geographic locations, but also within them. They highlight that Inuit communities are diverse and complex, and their perspectives and opinions cannot be treated as one unified voice. Furthermore, they also demonstrate that Inuit sustainability frameworks often differ from non-Inuit approaches. Mainstream, non-Inuit sustainability models often rely on quantifiable measurements and data, which are easy to categorize, such as the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). In comparison, Inuit perspectives tend to view the different elements as interconnected. In the analyzed Inuit documents, social, cultural, environmental, political, and economic aspects are not treated as separate entities, but rather overlap with each other and are dependent on a sustainable way of life.

This could suggest that applying non-Inuit frameworks to Inuit contexts risks oversimplification or misrepresentation. It is therefore essential not to generalize Inuit

perspectives, just as it is to avoid generalizing non-Inuit frameworks. However, recurring themes and patterns are evident in the analyzed documents, particularly in the issue of cultural sustainability. The actors involved in the documents shows various ways in which cultural sustainability is maintained through the interaction of other sustainability pillars. For example, VOICE sees a direct correlation between economic sustainability and the preservation of cultural sustainability. The Pikialasorsuaq Commission emphasizes that safeguarding environmental issues in the North Water Polynya is essential to maintaining the Inuit way of life. For SILA, protecting the land from extraction industries and preserving land, water, and animals is ultimately about protecting culture and the people.

Furthermore, political sustainability is also a core concept across all the cases, particularly in terms of the right to self-determination and Inuit leadership. Which, from a postcolonial lens, also makes sense, since if Inuit voices were not respected, then none of the other dimensions could be achieved. Therefore, a high focus on politics is necessary to initiate debates on other pillars of sustainability, thereby making political sustainability the foundation for the other four pillars.

As mentioned, in non-Inuit research, sustainability is often framed with statistics, numbers, and scientific methodologies. In the case of Pikialasorsuaq, the Commission supports scientific research from both Inuit and non-Inuit perspectives, while also emphasizing the importance of respecting other forms of knowledge. This could include knowledge passed down through generations, community-based knowledge, or knowledge gained from direct experiences of living on the land. The documents all emphasize that this type of knowledge from Inuit communities should not only be included, but also lead. The dynamics between non-Inuit knowledge and Inuit knowledge could be clarified with postcolonial theory, where mainstream sustainability is rooted in the history of power and

colonialism, and dominant knowledge systems have often marginalized Indigenous ones. As a result, Inuit knowledge has frequently been overlooked and treated as secondary, which is why, as already mentioned, it is crucial to understand the political dimension in the documents, as it necessitates acknowledging the historical context. So the call for Inuit leadership in the Pikialasorsuaq project or VOICE's fight for self-determination, or SILA's critique of extractive development, is not merely about environmental outcomes. It is about the right to remain on ancestral land, to shape their future, and to define what knowledge is valid.

It is here that epistemological pluralism becomes very important. For sustainability to be inclusive, it simply cannot just add an Inuit voice into an already existing framework. Instead, the frameworks have to be changed and give space for entirely different epistemologies and ways of knowing the world. This analysis has shown that Inuit communities already offer alternative ways to address sustainability issues and are actively using them on their terms. Their perspectives are not less developed or less modern, but they are produced differently, in a context-based manner, and often have a historical context working against them.

Moreover, the diversity of opinions across the cases studied in this thesis demonstrates that it is not possible to reduce sustainability to either "Inuit" or "non-Inuit" thinking. VOICE's support for the Willow Project, for example, may resemble a mainstream economic viewpoint, but that does not make it less valid or less legitimate. It is deeply contextual, shaped by lived realities in the North Slope. It also reflects the complexity of navigating sustainability in postcolonial contexts, where communities are trying to reclaim their authority within existing power structures. The main difference is not between Inuit and

non-Inuit worldviews, but between standardized, quantifiable, universal sustainability models and more flexible, relational, and context-based approaches.

These Inuit-led cases challenge mainstream non-Inuit sustainability by offering alternative ways of defining goals, success, and appropriate methods. The question is not just what sustainability means, but who gets to define it, and which knowledge systems are allowed to shape it.

6. Conclusion

This thesis aimed to examine how sustainability is represented and understood in Inuit communities by analyzing documents from Pikialasorsuaq and the North Slope. Furthermore, the goal was also to explore how these perspectives might differ or be similar to non-Inuit sustainability frameworks. With the use of Reflexive Thematic Analyses, six documents were analyzed to understand how sustainability is framed in terms of governance, environmental protection, and preservation of culture. The thematic approach was helpful not only for examining what was said but also for identifying patterns that revealed deeper meanings in the documents.

The findings of the analysis were then discussed in the discussion section, structured around three sub-questions to thoroughly and adequately explore the data and address the problem formulation.

The first sub-question examined how the Pikialasorsuaq project was framing sustainability in terms of Inuit knowledge, governance, and environmental protection. The documents emphasized that sustainability is not only about protecting the environment, but also about maintaining political authority and preserving cultural heritage. The different types of sustainability uncovered from the document all showed themselves to be deeply

interconnected and were seen or treated as different categories or pillars. For example, the Pikialasorsuaq commission focused more on Inuit leadership in decision-making and knowledge. In contrast, the Inuit community voices from the included interviews showed a much more emotional and experience-based concern, which was often rooted in cultural identity. Nonetheless, all perspectives showed the importance to preserve Inuit culture, and that Inuit must lead and have control over decision-making in initiatives concerning them. Thus, sustainability was framed as both a political right and a way to ensure cultural continuity.

The second sub-question examined how North Slope Iñupiat organizations framed sustainability regarding oil development. The viewpoints of the Inuit organizations VOICE and SILA were contrasted to find their differences and similarities. VOICE strongly supports the oil project Willow, seeing it as an economic development that is vital for their communities to stay on the land and preserve their culture. In contrast, SILA firmly opposes fossil fuel development, framing it as a threat to Inuit communities, land, and animals and as a betrayal of future generations. These opposing perspectives reflect the diversity that exists within Inuit communities themselves. However, they do share similarities, both their goals are to preserve culture, but their methods are where they differ. Despite their differences, both organizations emphasize the importance of self-determination and the right to govern their lands and communities.

The third sub-question addressed how Inuit understandings of sustainability contrast with dominant non-Inuit discourses. The analysis found that Inuit frameworks are often holistic and interconnected, encompassing different aspects, in contrast to the sustainability pillars, which treat environmental, economic, political, cultural, and social pillars as separate entities. Inuit perspectives tend to view these aspects as interconnected and overlapping.

Moreover, Inuit sustainability is deeply rooted and shaped by colonial history and the struggle for self-determination. Making all the cases highly contextual, and therefore different across regions and within communities. While non-Inuit frameworks often rely on quantifiable data, Inuit perspectives are more based on lived experience and knowledge passed down from generations. This highlights the importance of epistemological pluralism by acknowledging multiple, equally valid ways of knowing, thereby facilitating more inclusive sustainability frameworks.

This thesis applied three theoretical lenses to interpret the findings from the analysis. The theory of postcolonialism provides a broader context for historical power relations, helping to explain why Inuit sustainability is often rooted in political aspects. Epistemological pluralism emphasized the diversity of knowledge systems within and between Inuit communities, and the importance of treating them equally. Ultimately, the sustainability pillars facilitated the categorization of various types of sustainability. However, its limitations were evident when applied to Inuit perspectives. However, it still made the findings easier to understand and to describe how different types of sustainability exist and how they connect.

This study contributes to contemporary sustainability research by emphasizing that there is not one unified Inuit perspective on sustainability across or within communities. Instead, there are multiple perspectives all shaped by geographic location, lived experience, and community-based challenges. It is essential to recognize this diversity to avoid generalizations and respect the complexities of the Inuit knowledge system. Inuit perspectives should not merely be included in research, but should lead, as Inuit communities are those most affected by these sustainability initiatives. True inclusion, therefore, calls for a shift in the power of who can define sustainability and how it should be pursued.

Importantly, Inuit knowledge cannot be inserted into pre-existing non-Inuit frameworks; instead, the frameworks themselves have to adapt. Inuit sustainability initiatives demonstrate that there are different yet equally effective ways to understand and achieve a sustainable future.

It is important to note that the conclusions of this thesis are based on a specific set of documents from specific cases. It can therefore not be generalized to all Inuit communities. It also does not directly state what Inuit perspectives are, but merely how they are represented in the chosen documents. However, the case study presents a scenario that may resonate with other Inuit communities and contexts. It highlights the importance of Inuit leadership in sustainability and ensures that voices are not only heard but respected and acted upon. The complexities within Inuit perspectives must be acknowledged rather than reduced to a single narrative. Only then can sustainability be redesigned in genuinely inclusive ways.

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Appendices

Appendix A

Pikialasorsuaq Report 2017 – Analysis of the Commission's voice

Quote / Phrase	Initial Theme	Grouped Theme	Page
Shipping is important in this region and has a significant economic effect.	Shipping economy	Development pressures and shipping	p. 12
The management authority should establish a framework for regulating activities, including transportation, shipping, and off-shore industrial development.	Shipping regulation	Development pressures and shipping	p. xii
Many Inuit voiced concern around the greater number of ships using the Greenland Baffin waters and the negative effect this is having on wildlife.	Shipping harm	Development pressures and shipping	p. 12
The Pikialasorsuaq is seriously threatened by rapid change in the region including climatic and environmental change.	Climate threat	Environmental change and threats	p. viii
Each community emphasized that the Inuit who live in the region are best placed to monitor and manage the region.	Local governance	Inuit knowledge and governance	p. x
Inuit who live and use the Pikialasorsuaq must be recognized and respected as leaders in ensuring the protection of this area.	Leadership recognition	Inuit knowledge and governance	p. xii
This will ensure that research recognizes and aligns with Inuit priorities and that an equal partnership is created between Inuit and other parties concerned about the	Partnership and knowledge	Inuit knowledge and governance	p. 23

conservation of the Pikialasorsuaq.			
Establishing an Inuit-led monitoring system is key for ensuring that the Pikialasorsuaq remains healthy and productive.	Monitoring and leadership	Inuit knowledge and governance	p. 22
The regime should include the creation of an Inuit-led Pikialasorsuaq authority.	Governance structure	Inuit knowledge and governance	p. 22
There is a need for an effective monitoring system that bridges both sides of the polynya and draws on both Inuit and western scientific knowledge systems.	Hybrid knowledge system	Inuit knowledge and governance	p. 22
Our understanding of the Pikialasorsuaq is also greatly assisted by scientific investigations.	Science-supported governance	Inuit knowledge and governance	p. 22
There is no one better suited to fully articulate the meaning and intrinsic value of the Pikialasorsuaq than those who live it and depend on it.	Inuit lived knowledge	Inuit knowledge and governance	p. 5

Appendix B

Pikialasorsuaq Report 2017 – Analysis of Inuit interviews

Quote / Phrase	Initial Theme	Grouped Theme	Page
Inuit [...] have recognized the area as critical habitat for many migratory species upon which they depend for their food security as well as cultural and spiritual connections.	Cultural meaning of land	Cultural and ecological connection	p. viii
The polynya has been an important hunting ground for sustaining Inuit with food and resources for making clothing and tools,	Value of food and hunting	Cultural and ecological connection	p. 5

thus, invaluable for cultural and spiritual well-being.			
It's our life. It's just the way we live off animals, birds and fish. [...] And when we go out on the land, out on the ice, or camping, fishing, it's our ways of being healthy. Mentally healthy and overall.	Land and well-being	Cultural and ecological connection	p. 11
It should also be understood that if you want to adapt to the land where you are living, you need to live off the food that this land is providing you with, and that is exactly why people have lived and survived by.	Living of the land	Cultural and ecological connection	p. 6
This knowledge has developed over thousands of years hunting, fishing, and travel across the region.	Traditional knowledge	Cultural and ecological connection	p. 22
But today there is climate change and I am aware of that since the Greenlandic people who are our fellow-Inuit Inughuit do not travel here anymore.	Climate change impact	Environmental change and outside threats	p. 9
We do know that the polynya is changing [...] so, those are factors that we are quite concerned of and conscious of.	Polynya change awareness	Environmental change and outside threats	p. 10
Those are our arctic chars that we eat and if only a small amount of oil is leaked, those are the species that we would lose forever.	Species loss risk	Environmental change and outside threats	p. 12

Now that giant ships will pass through the waters the area of sea will be 'too small' for both wildlife and the huge ships.	Balance of wild-life and shipping	Environmental change and outside threats	p. 12
A greater number of ships also increases the possibility of oil spills, black carbon emissions, ballast discharge, noise pollution, invasive species, and light disturbances.	Negative impact of shipping	Environmental change and outside threats	p. 12
There is a concern that increased development, whether from tourism, mining, or shipping will have negative impact upon the Pikialasorsuaq.	Tourism and development concern	Environmental change and outside threats	p. 12
The benefits of employment outweighed the possible damage to the environment.	Economic/environment tradeoff	Environmental change and outside threats	p. 15
If our land and our animals were not affected too much, then we would be in agreement for the proposed economic activities.	Development support	Environmental change and outside threats	p. 15
Exploration and mining of the north for natural resources is another important source of income for local communities, but there continues to be concern about ensuring that these industries do not damage the environment and wildlife.	Development-income balance	Environmental change and outside threats	p. 14
We are not happy about those ships looking for oil in the	Unhappy about extractions ships	Environmental change and outside threats	p. 14

bottom of the sea and others searching for minerals. Arctic animals have nowhere else to go.			
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Appendix C

Leaders Statement from the Pikialasorsuaq Commission, 2019

Code/phrases	Initial theme	Final theme	Paragraph
We believe that this initiative provides a unique opportunity for us to come together to strengthen oceans conservation, and build a strong, sustainable Arctic region where Inuit share in its responsible management and future opportunities.	Shared governance and future opportunities	Governance and knowledge blending	¶8
Planning will be founded upon systems developed during the establishment of other Arctic marine protected areas as well as evidence-based Indigenous and Western knowledge [...]	Blending Indigenous and Western knowledge	Governance and knowledge blending	¶7
Today, for the benefit of Inuit Nunangat and for all Canadians, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and Inuit leaders commit to working in partnership together, and with the Governments of Denmark and Kalaallit Nunaat, to develop a path forward for advancing the sustainable marine management and	Partnerships and co-management	Governance and knowledge blending	¶7

environmental protection of the Pikialasorsuaq region, and to facilitate mobility for Inuit of the region.			
It follows that an objective of the Inuit Crown Partnership Committee is to advance specific initiatives which improve environmental protection and governance in Inuit Nunangat.	Governance and institutional frameworks	Governance and knowledge blending	¶6
It has supported Inuit of the region for millennia; as a food source through harvesting, and as a travel route connecting Inuit communities.	Cultural and ecological connection	Cultural and ecological connection	¶2
The Pikialasorsuaq influence and importance extend to an even larger cultural and ecological region than the boundaries of the ever-changing polynya, supporting globally significant wildlife populations.	Cultural and ecological connection	Cultural and ecological connection	¶2
Now, the Pikialasorsuaq and the Inuit that depend on it are facing possible threats of climate and environmental change and increased human activity.	Environmental threats and climate change	Environmental and development threats	¶2
Easier accessibility to the area and its resources from the effects of climate change is expected to increase the amount of fishing, shipping, tourism and	Development pressures and climate impact	Environmental and development threats	¶3

development in this region.			
This initiative will support strong Inuit communities, through the protection of the environment and preserving the biodiversity of this unique region.	Sustainability and resilience	Global sustainability frameworks and community concerns	¶8
The Conference of the Parties [...] adopted a Strategic Plan for Biodiversity for the 2011-2020 period, which called for Protection of coastal and marine areas, especially areas of particular importance for biodiversity and ecosystem, through effectively and equitably managed, ecologically representative and well-connected systems of protected areas and other effective area-based conservation methods.	Western frameworks and global governance	Global sustainability frameworks and community concerns	¶1
Inuit communities in Nunavut, Canada and Kalaallit Nunaat, which are closely associated with the Píkiyasorsuaq, have expressed concerns about food security in the region, as a matter of survival, and have also expressed concerns regarding the future of the Píkiyasorsuaq.	Food security and survival	Global sustainability frameworks and community concerns	¶3
[...] the Píkiyasorsuaq Commission issued a report in November 2017 identifying overarching objectives	Inuit-led policy development	Inuit governance, sovereignty, and leadership	¶5

that Inuit from Nunavut, Canada, and Kalaallit Nunaat seek to achieve; including the need for Inuit management and monitoring of the Pikialasorsuaq, and easier mobility for Inuit between Canada and Kalaallit Nunaat.			
[...] to advance Canada's commitment to a renewed relationship with Inuit, one based on the recognition of rights, respect, co-operation, and partnership.	State and Inuit partnership	Inuit governance, sovereignty, and leadership	¶6
Reconciliation and self-determination are key to this government's commitment to Inuit and establishing Inuit leadership in the Pikialasorsuaq supports this goal.	Postcolonial framing and Inuit sovereignty	Inuit governance, sovereignty, and leadership	¶8
[...] Inuit participation in marine management is needed to ensure the sustainable development and protection of the area and its resources.	Inuit governance and knowledge leadership	Inuit governance, sovereignty, and leadership	¶3
For generations, the Pikialasorsuaq has been an important transportation thoroughfare that has facilitated Inuit mobility.	Mobility and cultural preservation	Mobility, culture, and border challenges	¶4
In recent decades, it has become increasingly challenging to travel across international boundaries between communities of the Pikialasorsuaq region	Mobility and border restrictions	Mobility, culture, and border challenges	¶4

due to increased safety and security restrictions [...].			
Travel across the Pikialasorsuaq by sea ice, open water, or by air has helped sustain strong family, cultural and trade connections between Inuit in Nunavut, Canada and Kalaallit Nunaat.	Mobility and cultural continuity	Mobility, culture, and border challenges	¶4

Appendix D

Analysis of the Pikialasorsuaq Press release, 2018

Phrase / code	Initial theme	Final theme	Paragraph
Participants discussed the current governance of the Pikialasorsuaq, existing monitoring and research programs among many other issues.	Collaborative governance discussion	Governance and knowledge blending	¶4
During the workshop it was clear that there is support from the academic and government research community and local governments for collaboration between Inuit living in the area and produced implementation framework for management options that brings together local knowledge experts, Governments, scientific research and NGOs for a shared and sustainable management model for this great region.	Collaborative implementation and knowledge blending	Governance and knowledge blending	¶9
The Pikialasorsuaq is not just an ocean, or a unique wildlife area impacted by climate	Cultural and ecological identity	Cultural identity, preservation, and mobility	¶2

change. This is our home, our Nuna. This shared body of water defines who we are as people – it connects us.			
Removing travel barriers for people living in the communities adjacent to Pikialasorsuaq was at the heart of the Commission's work.	Mobility and access	Cultural identity, preservation, and mobility	¶6
Communities on both sides of the Pikialasorsuaq asked for free mobility between their communities to visit family and friends, preserve our language and cultural ties.	Cultural mobility and connection	Cultural identity, preservation, and mobility	¶7
We travelled freely between our communities and not being able to visit family because cost and documents are hard on our communities – we are one people.	Cultural preservation and shared identity	Cultural identity, preservation, and mobility	¶7
The Commission is responding to the communities, who have called for greater local stewardship of this shared marine region through an Inuit Management Authority, and Inuit-led monitoring regime and through free mobility to travel across the Pikialasorsuaq.	Inuit governance and leadership	Inuit sovereignty and leadership	¶3
Importantly, communities from the Pikialasorsuaq spoke to community priorities that will define the implementation of the Commission's work to manage and monitor	Community-led monitoring and conservation	Inuit sovereignty and leadership	¶5

the area, to lead in its conservation, and to promote local involvement in scientific research in the region.			
The work of the Pikialasorsuaq Commission may be global model for Indigenous stewardship and supports the concept of self-determination and Indigenous Protected Areas.	Global relevance and Indigenous sovereignty	Inuit sovereignty and leadership	¶10

Appendix E

Analysis of the resolution from Voice of the Arctic Inupiat, 2023

Phrase / code	Initial theme	Final theme	Paragraph
[...] promoting an understanding of the North Slope economy within the region and encourage culturally safe and responsible development for economic sustainability	Culturally appropriate development and economic sustainability	Economic sustainability and cultural continuity	¶2
[...] responsible resource development, with the inclusion and meaningful engagement of North Slope Inupiat has taken place for over fifty years, has created an opportunity to exemplify a positive model of cultural, economic, ecological interdependence	Integrated model of sustainability	Economic sustainability and cultural continuity	¶10
[...] the region and communities benefit from responsible development on the North Slope, through, among other things, continued	Community benefits from oil development	Economic sustainability and cultural continuity	¶11

strengthening of the Borough's tax base, employment opportunities across the North Slope entities, contracting opportunities for the tribes and Alaska Native corporations, and more specifically, access to funding for community projects through the National Petroleum Reserve-Alaska Impact Mitigation Grant Program			
[...] recognize the need by the Biden Administration to advance the Willow Project to further support the economic foundation of the North Slope region and ensure the sustainability and viability of its eight communities and the Iñupiat culture	Support for Willow and linking economy with culture	Economic sustainability and cultural continuity	¶12
[...] developing local content and responses with respect to activities within the region that allow for protection of the lands, waters and subsistence resources used by the Arctic Iñupiat for thousands of years	Protection of resources and environment	Protecting nature and traditional ways of life	¶3
[...] the North Slope Iñupiat have adapted to thrive in the Arctic, living off the aquatic and land resources to sustain their lifestyle, traditions and culture	Cultural adaptation and resilience	Protecting nature and traditional ways of life	¶7
[...] the Corporation's purpose, as defined in its Articles of	Political advocacy and local representation	Governance and representation	¶1

Incorporation, is to: promote the social welfare of the Iñupiaq people of the Arctic Slope...including, but not limited to: developing local advocacy and engagement for the Iñupiat of the Arctic Slope to state, federal and international forums addressing Arctic issues			
[...] acting to protect the interests of the Arctic Iñupiat	Advocating for Iñupiat interests	Governance and representation	¶4
[...] becoming the local knowledge center for the communities and people regarding developments in the Arctic Slope region	Local knowledge authority	Governance and representation	¶5
[...] and being a conduit for information transfer with outside organizations, including both governmental and non- governmental entities	Cross-institutional engagement	Governance and representation	¶6
[...] the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act (ANCSA) had one voice of opposition, the North Slope Iñupiat	Historical political resistance	Self-determination and political history	¶8
[...] the region's opposition to ANCSA spurred the creation of the North Slope Borough, to ensure that there was a mechanism to capture the economic benefits of the oil and gas development that would take place on their ancestral homelands – an act of Iñupiat self- determination	Founding of Borough as self- determination	Self-determination and political history	¶9

NOW THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED, the Board of Directors hereby approves and stands in support of the advancement of the Willow Project by the Biden Administration and urges the release of the project's Record of Decision by end of 2022.	Formal statement of political position	Self-determination and political history	¶13
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Appendix F

Analysis of the interview with Voice of the Arctic Iñupiat

Phrase / code	Initial Theme	Final theme	Paragraph
...more than \$1 billion in property taxes... will help to provide basic, yet essential, services like education, police, fire protection...	Public service funding through development	Economic sustainability and cultural continuity	¶4
The project is projected to generate hundreds of direct job opportunities...	Job creation for locals	Economic sustainability and cultural continuity	¶6
The Willow Project will have an undeniably positive impact on our communities.	Community benefits affirmation	Economic sustainability and cultural continuity	¶6
...to President Biden and his administration... who listened to and amplified the voices of the North Slope Iñupiat.	Acknowledgment of external political support	Economic sustainability and cultural continuity	¶9
We live in one of the most remote parts of the country... Without this project, our communities could face... vacating the lands we have inhabited for more than 10,000 years.	Economic necessity for staying on ancestral lands	Economic sustainability and cultural continuity	¶5
[...] the economic benefits to the North Slope region are enormous.	Regional economic benefit	Economic sustainability and cultural continuity	¶4

Willow is also projected to add \$2.5 billion to the NPR-A Impact Mitigation Grant Program...	Community grants and social services	Economic sustainability and cultural continuity	¶4
...tax revenue... will create many new job opportunities to support an expanded suite of essential services...	Service-related job growth	Economic sustainability and cultural continuity	¶6
Without this project, we would face an economic setback that could threaten our ability to remain on the North Slope...	Threat of economic displacement	Economic sustainability and cultural continuity	¶9
The benefits of Willow for Alaska Native people have been carefully considered...	Careful consideration of Indigenous benefits	Economic sustainability and cultural continuity	¶9
The Willow Project represents the long-term economic wellbeing of the North Slope Iñupiat.	Economic sustainability	Economic sustainability and cultural continuity	¶3
Of the thousands of construction jobs... many will be filled by locals...	Employment for Native people	Economic sustainability and cultural continuity	¶9
...creates large-scale revenue opportunities for locally owned businesses...	Native business opportunity	Economic sustainability and cultural continuity	¶9
[...] promoting an understanding of the North Slope economy and encouraging culturally responsible development for economic sustainability;	Culturally sensitive economic development	Economic sustainability and cultural continuity	¶2
...help secure our communities' future... allowing us to continue practicing and strengthening our traditions...	Securing future through development	Economic sustainability and cultural continuity	¶9
Willow is estimated to generate hundreds of direct jobs, thousands of construction jobs, a multitude of contracting	Economic opportunity and revenue	Economic sustainability and cultural continuity	¶4

opportunities for Native-owned businesses, and approximately \$6 billion from federal royalties and local and state taxes.			
We know our lands and our communities better than anyone...	Local expertise and knowledge	Governance and representation	¶7
Our twenty-four member organizations work collaboratively to ensure the Arctic Slope's collective voice is heard locally, regionally, and nationally.	Community representation and advocacy	Governance and representation	¶1
We urge outside activists to listen to Alaska Native voices...	External engagement and Indigenous voice	Governance and representation	¶7
[...] and acting as an information bridge between outside organizations and the Arctic Slope.	Intermediary role and outreach	Governance and representation	¶2
VOICE serves to protect the interests of the Arctic Slope Iñupiat by providing local advocacy and engagement;	Political advocacy	Governance and representation	¶1
Iñupiat communities played an important part in the design of the project by participating in over 25 public meetings...	Community participation in design	Governance and representation	¶6
We ensure our communities are heard by speaking with a unified voice...	Unified political voice	Governance and representation	¶10
...resource development and our subsistence way of life are not mutually exclusive.	Compatibility of development and tradition	Protecting nature and traditional ways of life	¶7
Responsible resource development has taken place for over 50 years...	Historical model of responsible development	Protecting nature and traditional ways of life	¶8
Understanding and embracing that interdependence is paramount to the	Interdependence of economy and culture	Protecting nature and traditional ways of life	¶8

longevity of North Slope Iñupiaq culture and traditions.			
...the project will make it possible for our community to continue our traditions while reinforcing the economic foundation...	Tradition and economy coexistence	Protecting nature and traditional ways of life	¶8
We know that Willow can coexist with our traditions and would not support it otherwise.	Support conditioned on cultural compatibility	Protecting nature and traditional ways of life	¶8
Willow has been designed to protect our traditional subsistence activities while providing economic opportunities...	Balanced development with tradition	Protecting nature and traditional ways of life	¶6
[...] developing content to support activities that allow for protection of land, waters, and subsistence resources	Environmental and subsistence protection	Protecting nature and traditional ways of life	¶2
The Willow Project has been designed to be compatible with our communities and culture...	Compatibility with community and culture	Protecting nature and traditional ways of life	¶9
The economic benefits derived from Willow will go far in advancing Iñupiat self-determination.	Development advancing self-determination	Self-determination and political history	¶9
Alaska's North Slope Iñupiat should – and ultimately did – play an important role in the process around Willow...	Inuit leadership in decision-making	Self-determination and political history	¶9
VOICE has worked tirelessly to empower our communities and advance the self-determination of our people.	Organizational support for self-determination	Self-determination and political history	¶9
The project ensures a viable future for our communities, generating economic stability for generations to come, and	Self-determination through economic stability	Self-determination and political history	¶3

advancing our self-determination as Alaska Natives.			
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Appendix G

Analysis of press release from Sovereign Iñupiat For a Living Arctic (SILA), 2023

Quote / Phrase	Initial Theme	Grouped Theme	Paragraph
Early Monday morning, the Biden Administration approved the development of the Willow Master Development Plan. This great disappointment comes after years of grassroots, Iñupiaq-led opposition, especially from the community most impacted, Nuiqsut.	Local opposition and disappointment	Environmental justice and local harm	¶1
Ensuring that communities like our own are able to not only survive but thrive through this transition into a sustainable future is vital to environmental justice.	Thriving through transition	Environmental justice and local harm	¶11
The Bureau of Land Management acknowledges in the Record of Decision (ROD) that if approved, it will have a disproportionate adverse effect on Nuiqsut's health, subsistence and sociocultural systems.	Health and sociocultural impacts	Environmental justice and local harm	¶3
It cites back to the 2020 ROD's finding that the project could even increase the already high rates of suicide in Nuiqsut.	Mental health and suicide risks	Environmental justice and local Harm	¶3

They state this development will have significant restrictions on subsistence for Nuiqsut directly and cumulatively. This recognition of the implications of development in the document announcing its approval is a slap in the face for environmental justice.	Subsistence impact and environmental justice	Environmental justice and local harm	¶3
Wealth is not what is in bank accounts, it is what we are able to provide for the environment around us and one another. And in this way, we are not setting up for our future generations to be wealthy.	Redefining wealth and generational ethics	Ethics and intergenerational responsibility	¶10
A Just Transition is setting the intentions to be a good ancestor and good relative to each other and the land and water. It means creating new relationships, deconstructing harmful processes of power, and providing for communities most dependent on extractive industries.	Just Transition values and relationships	Ethics and intergenerational responsibility	¶13
We mourn for our animal relatives who cannot speak or ask for protection, for the water that will forever be polluted, and especially for those who have been taken from us by the cancer caused by these extractive industries.	Ecological grief	Ethics and intergenerational responsibility	¶7

While this project may have been approved, the effort to divest from fossil fuels and invest in renewable energy continues.	Commitment to divestment	Sustainability, climate crisis, and Just Transition	¶5
The only reasonable solution to climate change is the divestment from all fossil fuels and a Just Transition into renewable energy.	Call for Just Transition	Sustainability, climate crisis, and Just Transition	¶8
The fossil fuel industry is obsolete and will come to an end soon, whether it be from climate catastrophe or the rational and wise decisions of our leaders.	Fossil fuel criticism	Sustainability, climate crisis, and Just Transition	¶8
Yes, it will be hard to transition from fossil fuels. Yes, it will be expensive. But there is no greater price to pay than the loss of biodiversity, coastlines, and lives.	Transition difficulty and ethical cost	Sustainability, climate crisis, and Just Transition	¶9
We condemn the continued prioritization of profit over climate and people.	Critique of profit-driven development	Sustainability, climate crisis, and Just Transition	¶4
This is a shift from a destructive economy to a regenerative economy.	Systemic economic transformation	Sustainability, climate crisis, and Just Transition	¶12
We mourn the implications of worsening climate change within the Arctic and worldwide.	Climate change mourning	Sustainability, climate crisis, and Just Transition	¶6
While this project may have been approved, the effort to divest from fossil fuels and invest in renewable energy continues. We will not give up protecting the Arctic	Continued commitment to Arctic protection	Sustainability, climate crisis, and Just Transition	¶14

today, tomorrow, or ever.			
With the support of millions worldwide, Willow went from predominantly an Alaska-based issue to a global concern within weeks, millions of voices stood up against the oil and gas industry to protect the Arctic.	Global solidarity and awareness	Local and global environmental solidarity	¶2