

# World view



By Julia Christensen

## Canadian housing crisis demands local leadership

**Climate change is displacing thousands across the Arctic. Governments must act on the advice of Indigenous and local communities.**

**O**n 15 June, I received a heartbreaking text: “Getting our last few items ready, plus our pets. Need prayer!” It came from Arthur Tobac, director of the K’asho Got’įnę Housing Society in Fort Good Hope in Canada’s Northwest Territories (NWT), who was preparing to evacuate his home as a wildfire approached. Hours later, the flames arrived at the town’s edge. All 500 residents had to flee. In the next two weeks, the wildfire spread across more than 5,000 hectares despite efforts to control it.

This disaster is a symptom of both the climate crisis and the northern housing crisis. The two are inextricably linked, as I know all too well. I grew up in the NWT and am now project director for At Home in the North ([athomeinthenorth.org](http://athomeinthenorth.org)), a partnership of university researchers, Indigenous and northern community-based organizations and governments seeking to address the housing crisis collaboratively.

In summer 2023, nearly 70% of the population of the NWT was evacuated owing to wildfires. Across northern Canada, climate change is threatening housing and infrastructure not only through wildfires, but through coastal erosion, flooding, low water levels, permafrost thaw and high winds. Most Indigenous communities in Canada, including those of the Dene Nation in the NWT, are very remote, as a result of colonial policy. This puts Indigenous Peoples at a higher risk of climate-change-induced displacement and infrastructure loss than other Canadians.

For decades, leaders in Fort Good Hope have warned that industrial development would have disastrous consequences locally – for the climate and Indigenous ways of life, as well as for infrastructure, transportation and accessibility. Now, those predictions are being borne out. Yet, in its 2024 budget, the federal government ignored the role of climate change in worsening the northern housing crisis. The NWT Legislative Assembly has declared that housing is a fundamental right, but nearly half of the region’s housing is deemed inadequate, unsuitable or unaffordable. In Fort Good Hope, more than 40% of the population live in inadequate housing, 10% are unhoused and many homes are falling into the Mackenzie River as its banks erode.

Across northern Canada, chronic housing need has been a problem since the federal government introduced modern housing and settlements as part of its post-Second World War vision to ‘develop’ the North for resource extraction and to exercise its sovereignty over the Arctic. The provider of public housing for the territory, Housing NWT, acknowledged this in its 2021 strategic renewal report. Yet updating

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housing policy continues to be a challenge in a region where the state remains the main or sole housing provider in most communities. Governments have failed to develop a northern housing industry; labour and materials must be transported from the south. Communities are vulnerable to supply-chain obstacles created by wildfires, flooding and low water levels during the short summer construction season. For the second year in a row, communities on the Mackenzie River will not get the barge deliveries they rely on for fuel and materials for housing construction and repair.

Stop-gap measures such as temporary evacuations inhibit the ability of northern, Indigenous communities to plan a long-term future in a changed landscape. The Canadian Constitution recognizes that Indigenous Peoples have the right to self-government. Yet Indigenous governments trying to tackle housing needs sustainably are being stifled by unreliable funding and building codes, planning legislation and housing metrics that don’t reflect northern community contexts, and the siloed governance of housing, health and child welfare.

In April, Canada’s Auditor General committed to an audit of Housing NWT, but communities cannot wait. Northern communities should be equipped to respond to their own needs through self-building, self-repair and community-led housing planning. Funding to build off-grid, mobile and self-sufficient housing is desperately needed.

Self-governed housing organizations have made great strides in spite of these limitations. Fort Good Hope set up the K’asho Got’įnę Housing Society in 2020; it has received national recognition and funding for its innovative, community-led approach. Other Indigenous organizations across northern Canada have also been working to alleviate chronic housing need with the help of local expertise.

The path to justice will not be found in the status quo. As James Caesar, a former manager with the K’asho Got’įnę Housing Society, told me, what we are really dealing with is “a crisis of colonialism and capitalism”. Once again, Indigenous communities are grappling with inequities while being positioned as casualties in a colonial economy that has relentlessly pursued the dispossession of Indigenous lands for resource extraction. Indigenous self-determination – as proposed by the global Land Back movement – is the key to transforming the systems that drive both the housing crisis and the climate crisis.

As called for by the Dene Nation after last summer’s wildfire evacuations, the only viable policy response is one that follows the leadership of northern, Indigenous communities. It must use community-led strategies to address housing needs and climate change, while tasking territorial and federal governments with emergency-response planning. This can be achieved by centring Land Back in the national climate policy response.