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Resilience, reflexivity, and decolonization: policy narratives in Kalaallit Nunaat

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Background: Kalaallit Nunaat (Greenland) is undergoing rapid socio-economic and environmental transformations, particularly due to climate change, shifting governance structures and aspirations for political independence. These developments necessitate resilient policy approaches to support sustainable regional development while addressing historical and contemporary power dynamics.

Aim: This paper examines policy narratives in Kalaallit Nunaat, analyzing how they shape resilience building processes. Specifically, it explores the interplay between system oriented and community resilience approaches in national and regional policymaking.

Method: A policy narrative analysis was conducted through a review of national strategies, government reports and other public policy documents from 2011 to 2020. The study applies a decolonial lens to examine how these narratives frame resilience, governance and development priorities in Kalaallit Nunaat.

Results: Four key narratives were identified: (1) the independence narrative, (2) the regional inequality narrative, addressing governance centralization and disparities between Nuuk and smaller settlements; (3) socio-economic and demographic challenges narrative, highlighting population decline, labour market issues and social inequalities; and (4) and climate change narrative, framing environmental shifts as both risks and economic opportunities. While all narratives prioritize independence, they differ in their perspectives on governance structure, local agency, and resilience building strategies. The study finds that policy narratives often assume resilience as an outcome of economic growth and political reforms, rather than a structured community driven process.

Conclusion: A decolonial approach to policy development in Kalaallit Nunaat requires centering community perspectives and strengthening locally driven decision-making processes. Rather than treating resilience as an assumed outcome of economic growth, policies should actively support long-term resilience-building by addressing structural inequalities, ensuring inclusive governance and integrating local knowledge into decision-making. By balancing community driven priorities with national governance reforms, policies can better support sustainable and equitable development.

KEYWORDS

policy narratives, Kalaallit Nunaat, system resilience, community resilience, decolonial governance, Arctic regional development

Introduction

The Arctic is a vast and unique region, characterized by its harsh cold climate, long winters and extreme seasonal shifts in sunlight with months of polar nights in winter and continuous midnight sun in summer. It is also home to a variety of cultures, wildlife, and natural resources. In recent years, the effects of climate change on the Arctic ecosystem have become a growing concern, particularly for Indigenous communities that have lived in these regions for generations (Makondo and Thomas, 2018; Sangha et al., 2018; United Nations, 2023). Among these communities are the Kalaallit, the Indigenous people of Kalaallit Nunaat, the world's largest island. They make up approximately 85% of the population (Jungsberg et al., 2019) and govern their own country through Self-Rule, which grants them authority over most domestic affairs. Throughout this article, we use Kalaallit Nunaat to refer to Greenland and Kalaallit to refer to its Indigenous inhabitants, acknowledging their language and perspectives as central to policy and resilience discussions.

Kalaallit Nunaat has undergone significant governance transformations, particularly since 2009, when the country achieved self-governing status within the Kingdom of Denmark. This transition granted Kalaallit Nunaat autonomy in areas such as natural resource management, social affairs, justice, and environmental policy, allowing for greater control over regional development. This shift has increasingly enabled Kalaallit Nunaat to set its own policy course and build resilience in the face of the challenges confronting the Arctic region.

Policies are shaped not only by institutional structures but also by policy narratives—the stories, metaphors, and arguments constructed by policymakers, civil servants, and other stakeholders to justify particular courses of action. Policy narratives influence governance by framing which challenges are prioritized, which solutions are deemed legitimate, and whose perspectives are included (Miedziński, 2018). While these narratives help define policymaking, their translation into concrete policies is influenced by power structures, lobbying, and institutional constraints (Majone, 1989).

Resilience, originally an ecological concept introduced in the 1960s (Holling, 1973) now spans disciplines like engineering, psychology, and disaster risk management. It refers to the ability of individuals, communities, organizations, and systems to adapt and recover from disruptions (Folke, 2006) and is recognized by institutions like the OECD and the United Nations as vital for risk management and sustainable development. However, resilience is also a contested concept (Grove, 2018). A study on islands found that resilience can be both empowering and disempowering, depending on whether it builds on local strengths, acknowledges nuances, and is contextually grounded (Kelman, 2018). In an indigenous context, some scholars critique its use as a post-colonial governance tool reinforcing external control (Evans and Reid, 2014), others argue that Indigenous resilience is inherently linked to cultural continuity and self-determined governance (Reid, 2024; Usher et al., 2021; Kirmayer et al., 2011). Additionally, resilience-building is shaped by diverse knowledge systems and lived experiences, which influence how communities develop strategies for adaptation and sustainability (Weichselgartner and Kelman, 2015; Maureira and Stenbacka, 2015).

Policy narratives do not operate in isolation; they are shaped by historical and colonial legacies that influence governance structures and decision-making. As Kim (2012) argues, narrative hierarchies

often position Indigenous perspectives as supplementary rather than central, reinforcing colonial power structures in policymaking. In Kalaallit Nunaat, dominant policy narratives reflect both aspirations for political sovereignty and economic self-sufficiency, yet they often operate within institutional frameworks inherited from Danish governance.

A decolonial approach to policy narratives requires recognizing Indigenous knowledge systems and governance models as integral to policymaking, rather than treating them as alternative or symbolic. This involves critically examining how policy narratives frame resilience—whether as a means of maintaining existing power structures or as a pathway to self-determined adaptation and governance.

This study examines how policy narratives shape resilience and regional development in Kalaallit Nunaat given the global, regional and local challenges the country faces. We hypothesize that different policy narratives correspond to distinct framings of resilience, emphasizing certain aspects while overlooking others. Policy narratives do not merely describe resilience; they also define who is responsible for building it, what knowledge is considered valuable, and how solutions are framed (Entman, 1993; Wardekker, 2021, 2023).

For this analysis, we use two distinct framings of resilience: *system resilience* and *community resilience* (Wardekker, 2021, 2023). System resilience focuses on systemic structures, functions, and processes, while community resilience emphasizes social cohesion, local resources, and cultural continuity, recognizing that resilience is often maintained through land-based knowledge, intergenerational adaptation and relational governance (Berkes and Ross, 2013).

By analyzing national and regional development policies in Kalaallit Nunaat, we aim to (1) Identify policy narratives on national and regional development in Greenland found in public policies and governmental documents. (2) Examine how these narratives might shape resilience in Greenland by analyzing their connection to different framings of resilience (system versus community-focused).

While existing studies on policy narratives in Kalaallit Nunaat have focused on the international context—examining Greenland's relationship with other Arctic actors in terms of political value, history, and behavior (Allan, 2020; Hastrup, 2018) there is limited research on internal policy narratives and their role in shaping resilience. By addressing this gap this study contributes to a better understanding of how policy narratives influence governance, resilience-building and decolonial policy making in Kalaallit Nunaat.

Materials and methods

The methods and materials section is divided into four parts. The first part defines and examines the concept of policy narratives. The second part outlines the data collection and processing methods, including the analysis of policy documents such as public strategies, government reports, and other official public records. The third part provides an overview of Kalaallit Nunaat's history and its current main export revenues to contextualize the policy narratives and their impact on regional development. Finally, the fourth part offers a critical reflection on the methodological approach and discusses any limitations that may affect the validity of the findings.

Defining policy narratives

Policy narratives have been defined as the scenarios and arguments that shape policymaking (Roe, 1994; Miedziński, 2018). The narratives provide stability by establishing assumptions and justifying policy directions (ibid.). Studying narratives in policies reveals that policies are not neutral reflections of reality but socially constructed frameworks (Nedlund and Nordh, 2015). Policy narratives blend empirical evidence, normative goals and persuasive arguments, influencing how problems and solutions are framed. They influence institutional actions, governance priorities, and policy legitimacy (Atkinson, 2000; Béné et al., 2018; Daniels and Endfield, 2009).

While dominant narratives tend to reinforce existing power structures, policy narratives are not static—they evolve through contestation, incorporating new knowledge and shifting political priorities (Nedlund and Nordh, 2015; Curran, 2021). Key characteristics define policy narratives. First, they follow a structured logic, often presenting a problem, cause, and solution (Roe, 1994). Second, framing plays a crucial role, guiding attention toward specific issues while excluding competing perspectives (Ingimundarson, 2015). Third, narratives are context-dependent, gaining meaning from the historical, political, and social landscape in which they are embedded (Vanderlinden, 2020). Finally, power dynamics influence which narratives gain prominence, shaping policy targets and governance approaches (Curran, 2021; Roe, 1994; Toivonen et al., 2021).

Narratives not only define policy direction but also frame resilience—determining whether resilience is actively built through governance reforms and adaptive capacity-building or assumed as an outcome of economic and institutional stability (Béné et al., 2018; Daniels and Endfield, 2009). Some narratives position resilience as a long-term outcome of economic growth or governance stability, while others actively integrate resilience-building measures—such as decentralization, education reform, or climate adaptation strategies. This distinction is important for understanding how policy narratives either support or hinder resilience-building efforts in Kalaallit Nunaat.

Data collection and processing

In this study, we conducted a desktop review of national-level policies, strategies, and other relevant policy documents in Kalaallit Nunaat. The process of document identification and compilation was carried out between October 2020 and January 2021 through the website of Naalakkersuisut, the government of Kalaallit Nunaat. We selected government strategies and other policy documents from the period 2011–2020, with a focus on regional, economic, social, environmental aspects as well as policies targeting fisheries, hunting agriculture, mineral resource extraction, the labour market and welfare. These policy areas were chosen because they represent key sectors shaping Kalaallit Nunaat's long-term resilience, economic independence, and social development. Examining natural resource management policies provided insights into how resilience is framed in relation to economic and environmental governance, while labor market and welfare policies highlighted how social challenges—such as employment, migration, and inequality—are addressed within policy frameworks.

Each of the strategies and policy documents were carefully reviewed, and additional reports or documents were included when relevant. In January 2021, a Scholar from Ilisimatusarfik, University of Greenland, validated the compiled list of strategies and supplemented it with additional documents. The final dataset consisted of 23 documents, of which 17 were identified as crucial for understanding Kalaallit Nunaat's future policy direction. We extracted key points from these documents and categorized them to identify overarching policy narratives. Through this process, we identified four dominant narratives that served as the primary reasoning or argumentation behind policies and strategies. When referencing the policy documents in the analysis, we have in some cases chosen to name them after their themes (e.g., *Oil Strategy, 2020*) rather than by their official titles. This approach minimizes excessive attribution to Naalakkersuisut, streamlining the narrative and improving readability, while ensuring clear thematic organization of the strategies discussed (Figure 1).

Study site

Kalaallit Nunaat is the world's largest island, home to approximately 56,000 people. It is part of the Kingdom of Denmark but has a unique history shaped by colonization and its path toward greater self-determination. The colonial period began in 1721 with the arrival of the Danish-Norwegian missionary Hans Egede. Greenland remained a colony until 1953, when it was formally integrated into Denmark. Over the decades, Kalaallit Nunaat has made significant strides toward self-governance, starting with the establishment of Home Rule in 1979 and advancing to Self-Rule in 2009.

Since 2009, Kalaallit Nunaat's government has assumed responsibility for most areas except foreign policy and matters concerning the Supreme Court.¹ Decisions about natural resources, such as minerals and oil, fall under the jurisdiction of Kalaallit Nunaat's government. The fishing industry remains the backbone of the economy, accounting for over 90% of exports (Statistics Greenland, 2018). Today, Kalaallit Nunaat faces a rapidly changing geopolitical landscape as climate change reshapes the Arctic. Melting ice opens new pathways and opportunities for development while also presenting significant challenges for the people and environment of the region.

Reflexivity

Writing about Kalaallit Nunaat without the direct involvement of an Indigenous scholar as a co-author requires thoughtful reflection. Reflexivity, as Whitaker and Atkinson (2021) describe, is an essential and unavoidable feature of all research. It acknowledges that the researcher's positionality, methods, and choices shape the knowledge being produced. We believe that practicing reflexivity is crucial for ensuring credibility and transparency while recognizing the limitations of our positionality in analyzing Kalaallit Nunaat's policy narratives.

¹ <https://stat.gl/dialog/topmain.asp?lang=en&subject=Kriminalitet&sc=KR>

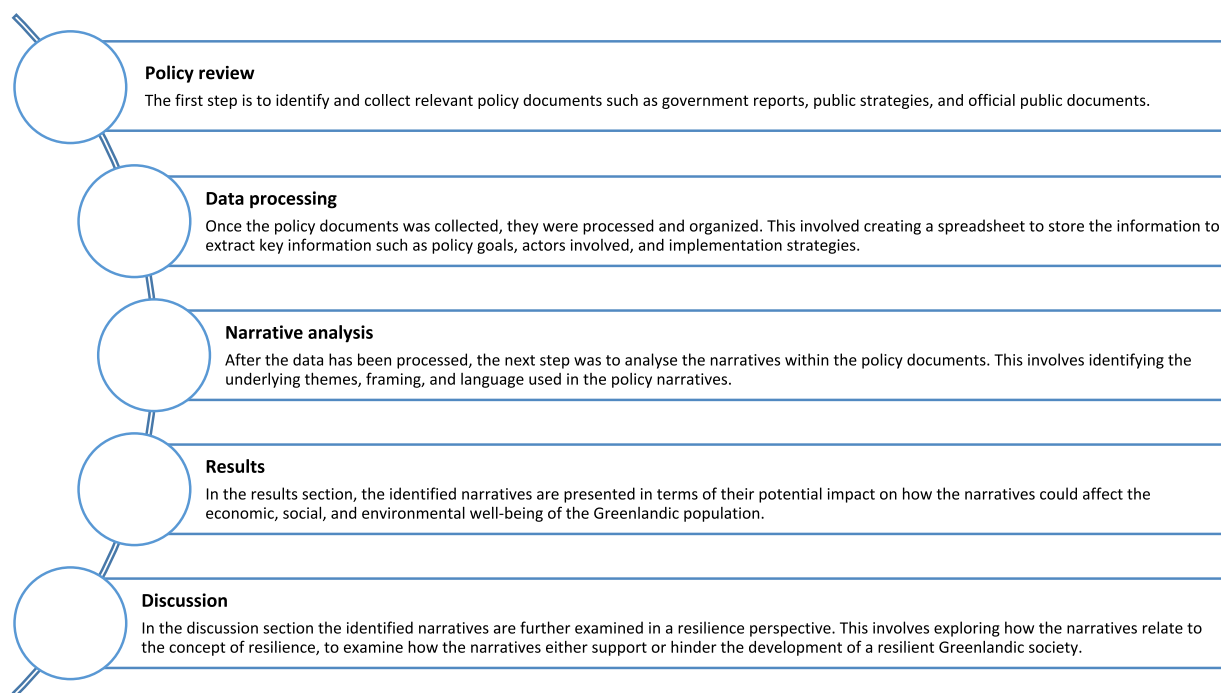


FIGURE 1
Diagram showing the process from policy review to analysis and results.

Our aim has been to understand and support Kalaallit Nunaat, recognizing the diversity of voices and perspectives advocating for different developmental paths within it. While we have consulted local scholars and engaged with Kalaallit perspectives, we recognize that western academic frameworks and methodologies inherently influence how policy is analyzed.

The contribute meaningfully to this dialogue, Kalaallit Nunaats policy narratives must avoid reinforcing western-centric perspectives and should instead center indigenous self-representation of resilience. This means moving beyond framing resilience through economic and institutional stability and instead recognizing resilience as relational, intergenerational, and embedded in cultural, environmental, and governance systems. A decolonial approach requires not only analyzing policy but questioning whose voices shape it and how knowledge systems are legitimized in decision-making.

Limitations

The results presented in this article are based on data collected from 2011 to 2020, with the data collection process concluding in January 2021. While the article's publication has been delayed due to personal circumstances, we argue that the analysis remains relevant. The four identified narratives hold significance not only from a historical perspective but also for understanding and planning current and future policy developments in Kalaallit Nunaatic society.

By applying the concept of narratives, our aim is to shed light on the arguments and driving factors behind national-level policies. This approach is not intended to diminish individual experiences or suggest that issues such as social challenges are merely abstract narratives. Similarly, one might ask, “*Is climate change truly a*

narrative?” The answer depends on how the concept of ‘policy narratives’ is defined and applied.

In this context, we define policy narratives as representations of reality that selectively highlight and emphasize certain aspects to justify a particular policy direction. With this understanding, we argue that the term “narrative” is appropriate for analyzing how policy issues are framed and prioritized to advocate for specific regional development paths.

That said, we also acknowledge the limitations of this approach. There are many perspectives and lived experiences among people in Kalaallit Nunaat’s diverse communities that may not be fully represented. Additionally, local political discussions may feature alternative narratives that differ from those identified in this study. Recognizing this diversity is essential for a more nuanced and inclusive understanding of Kalaallit Nunaat policy development.

Results: policy narratives and their role in resilience building

Four policy narratives have been identified in public policy documents, strategies, and other related materials. The first, referred to as the independence narrative, focuses on the goal of achieving economic and political independence from Denmark. The second narrative addresses regional inequality, emphasizing the impacts of centralization and urbanization in Kalaallit Nunaat. The third narrative highlights socioeconomic challenges that influence regional development, including issues related to education, employment, and social conditions in Kalaallit Nunaat. Lastly, the fourth narrative explores the effects of climate change on the Arctic environment and its potential implications for regional development in Kalaallit Nunaat.

It should be noted that these four narratives may overlap in some instances and may not necessarily have distinct objectives. For example, some of the narratives may share the aim of achieving economic and political independence from Denmark, but they may have different approaches or priorities. Additionally, some of the narratives may be perceived as conflicting or diverging significantly in their strategies to achieve their objectives.

Independence narrative

Increased economic and political independence from Denmark is a central narrative identified in the national policy documents (e.g., *National Spatial Plan*, 2017; *Naalakkersuisut*, 2011; *Sustainability and Growth Plan*, 2016; *Oil and Mineral Strategy*, 2014). The presented vision is to develop the Kalaallit Nunaat economy with the aim to become economically self-reliant and, in time, independent from Denmark (*Sustainability and Growth Plan*, 2016). Increased independence is emphasised as a goal that has broad political and public support (*ibid.*; see also *Naalakkersuisut*, 2011). The political goal of independence is exemplified by the establishment of Kalaallit Nunaat's constitutional commission in 2017. The commission was assigned the task to prepare a draft constitution to be discussed in the Kalaallit Nunaat parliament, *Iniatissartut*, in 2021. Should Kalaallit Nunaat become independent the constitution, if approved, will be the legal basis for the independent nation of Kalaallit Nunaat (*Nuttall*, 2019a).

The independence narrative is embedded in the current status of Kalaallit Nunaat as a self-governing territory within the Kingdom of Denmark and the colonial history (*Priebe*, 2016). While the historic context is a central element of the narrative, the discussions are primarily economic of character. In the policy documents, the pathway to increased independence is by economic growth and the development of Kalaallit Nunaat's economy to become sustainable and self-reliant. This must be understood in light of the fact that Kalaallit Nunaat on a yearly basis receives a financial subsidy on approximately DKK 3.9 billion from Denmark (*Finansministeriet*, 2020, p. 237). The subsidy supply around 60% of the government revenue and account for 40% of Kalaallit Nunaat's GDP (*Grunfelder et al.*, 2018). Economic stability and growth are considered preconditions for increased economic independence, and thereby the ability to take over more areas of government from the Danish state resulting in increased political independence (*Naalakkersuisut*, 2016, p. 4).

Diversifying economic activities is seen as a crucial step towards achieving a self-reliant economy in Kalaallit Nunaat, as the current economy relies heavily on fisheries, which account for approximately 90% of export revenues (*Naalakkersuisut*, 2011; *Sustainability and Growth Plan*, 2016). To promote economic development, there is an emphasis on the “three pillars” of fishery, tourism, and natural resource extraction (*Poppel*, 2019; *Ren et al.*, 2020; *Mineral strategy*, 2020). The tourism sector, for example, aims to increase earnings and employment opportunities, with a long-term goal of doubling the number of land-based and cruise ship tourists by 2040, resulting in the creation of 888 full-time, all-year jobs and DKK 492 million in turnover per year (*Tourism Strategy*, 2016). Other sectors, such as ice and water exports and the establishment of data centres, are also explored as potential sources of growth (*Strategy for Export of Ice and Water*, 2017; *Sector Plan for Energy and Water Supply*, 2017). This

emphasis on economic growth is closely linked to the narrative of achieving independence (*Grydehøj*, 2016).

While economic growth is positioned as the foundation for independence, these policies focus primarily on macroeconomic indicators rather than the mechanisms that build long-term resilience. This approach neglects the complex power dynamics of economic dependence and independence, which do not necessarily determine political sovereignty (*Grydehøj*, 2019). Studies on island governance suggests that the concepts of economic independence and economic dependence are unsuitable as indicators of readiness or unreadiness for island political independence (*ibid.*). Yet without concurrent investment in governance capacity and economic diversification, the independence narrative risks treating resilience as an assumed outcome rather than a structured process.

Regional inequality narrative

An unequal regional development in Kalaallit Nunaat and especially between the capital of Nuuk and the rest of the country is identified as another narrative. Though development in all of Kalaallit Nunaat are emphasised in the national spatial plan as an explicit goal, some actors stress an unequal development especially within the public sector. The structural reform merging 18 municipalities to four in 2009 had the aim to support strong municipalities and decentralisation (*Hansen*, 2015). However, some actors have stressed that the trend has moved in the direction of increased centralisation, especially towards the capital of Nuuk (*Berthelsen et al.*, 2016). The mayors of the municipalities of Qeqqata, Qaasuitsup² and Kujalleq report of an unequal development in the public sector favouring the capital of Nuuk on the disperse of the other regions with the result of increasing inequality in Kalaallit Nunaat (*ibid.*).

With the construction of three new international airports in Nuuk, Ilulissat, and Qaqortoq, the inequality gap between larger settlements and smaller villages in Kalaallit Nunaat is at risk of increasing. Research highlights feelings of regional inequality among citizens living in smaller settlements. In the Qaanaaq district of northwestern part of Kalaallit Nunaat, local residents identify increased centralization as a significant challenge for local business development. Since the municipal reform, the administrative center feels even more remote, and several professional functions have been removed from the district. This has weakened the development of locally anchored solutions, with residents noting that fewer resources are being allocated to rural areas like Qaanaaq (*Hendriksen and Hoffmann*, 2016). In the Upernavik district, located further south in northwestern Kalaallit Nunaat, anthropologist Mark Nuttall documented how local communities feel disadvantaged and overlooked in national debates and political decision-making. This sentiment is particularly evident in discussions about hunting and fishing quotas, which are determined by civil servants in Nuuk based on input from biologists working at the Pinnngortitaleriffik, Greenland Institute of Natural Resources. These decisions often fail to integrate

2 Qaasuitsup split into two municipalities in 2018, forming Avannaata and Qeqertalik. Therefore, today there are five municipalities in Greenland today: Avannaata, Qeqertalik, Qeqqata, Sermersooq, Kujalleq.

local knowledge and observations on an ongoing basis, leaving hunters and fishermen feeling excluded from having a say in the quota decisions (Nuttall, 2019b).

The mayors of Qeqqata, Qaasuitsup and Kujalleq municipalities expressed their support for the national goal of a self-reliant economy and taking over more governmental areas from Denmark, as such the independence narrative is also present here. However, the mayors stress that the development in recent years have resulted in a weaker and more fragmented nation, and thereby moving further away from realizing the goal of independence. To achieve the overarching goals of the government, the mayors argue that it is crucial to combat the increasing inequality and especially between the capital and the rest of Kalaallit Nunaat.

The regional inequality narrative highlights disparities but lacks a clear policy framework for building resilience in smaller communities. While decentralization was initially framed as a resilience strategy, the trend toward increased centralization has instead weakened localized decision-making. Without governance structures that reinforce community agency, regional resilience risks being an unmet policy goal rather than a tangible process.

Socioeconomic, demographic, and social challenges narrative

A third identified narrative affecting regional development concerns addressing social and socioeconomic challenges in Kalaallit Nunaat. To secure a sustainable regional development, several documents address social issues which must be addressed and attended to (Sustainability and Growth Plan, 2016; Naalakkersuisut *beskæftigelsesstrategi*, 2020; Naalakkersuisut, 2011). Challenges emphasised are low educational levels, outmigration and unemployment. A projected population decrease from 56,000 in 2020 to 48,000 in 2048 in combination with a significant change in the population mix with a significant decrease in the working age population is emphasised in the employment strategy (Sustainability and Growth Plan, 2016; Naalakkersuisut *beskæftigelsesstrategi*, 2020). As such, there will be fewer people to participate in the economic activities that should secure a self-reliant economy.

Another societal challenge is the so-called ‘paradox’, where the supply of unemployed is increasing whilst the demand for employees exists. Furthermore, there are large differences in degree of unemployment across regions. Unemployment is significantly lower in the larger cities as Nuuk, Sisimiut and Illulissat, whilst the unemployment is higher in smaller settlements across the territory (Naalakkersuisut *beskæftigelsesstrategi*, 2020). Reasons behind unemployment include low educational levels, but also significant social problems in Kalaallit Nunaat that make some people unable to hold a job: *Too many who are unemployed are not actually available for the labour market, because they are burdened by large social problems* (Naalakkersuisut *beskæftigelsesstrategi*, 2020, p. 17; author’s translation). These social problems include large challenges with child abuse, alcoholism, and suicide rates that are six to seven times higher than in the other Nordic countries (Statistics Greenland, 2018; Olsvig, 2019).

The socioeconomic narrative presents resilience-building challenges, particularly in education and workforce participation. While economic self-sufficiency is a policy goal, there is limited

discussion on strengthening social infrastructure to build long-term resilience. Policies need to move beyond identifying vulnerabilities toward concrete mechanisms that enable individuals and communities to adapt to economic and social change.

Climate change narratives

Climate change has been identified as a fourth policy narrative that influences the pathway and policies for regional development in Kalaallit Nunaat. Anthropogenic climate change will affect society, the environment, and nature, and will have an impact on livelihoods. This is happening at the fastest pace in the Arctic (Naalakkersuisut, 2012; Naalakkersuisut, 2017).

To estimate the impacts of climate change on central economic sectors, climate adaptation reviews have been conducted since 2010 on the government’s initiative. The first review, published in 2012, focused on the impacts on fishery and hunting. The effects of climate change that are emphasized for Kalaallit Nunaat are increasing temperatures over land and sea, increased precipitation (especially in the North), increased melting of the ice cap and glaciers, thawing permafrost, a shorter period of snow cover, and increasing sea levels with potential unpredictable consequences for ocean streams (Naalakkersuisut, 2012; Jungsberg et al., 2021).

From a narrative perspective, climate change presents both opportunities and challenges for regional development in Kalaallit Nunaat. The fishery and hunting sector, central to society and culture, is expected to be profoundly impacted by climate change. This will not only affect the economy but also have far-reaching cultural, nutritional, and social implications. While certain areas of the fishery sector stand to benefit from climate change, such as increased accessibility and traffic, others will face significant disruptions, including ice fishing in the North and coastal fisheries. Coastal fisheries may be disrupted due to shifts in fish distribution as species migrate to deeper or more distant waters, making them less accessible to local fishermen. These changes are likely to create substantial regional disparities in opportunities for the sector (Naalakkersuisut, 2012).

Climate change also opens new possibilities for shipping, including altered routes, increased maritime traffic, and expanded tourism opportunities—particularly for cruise ships—alongside potential growth in fisheries and raw material extraction on both land and sea (Naalakkersuisut, 2015; Jungsberg, 2022). Additionally, longer growing seasons could support the development of Kalaallit Nunaat’s agricultural sector (Naalakkersuisut, 2017).

Kalaallit’s often express a deep sense of autonomy in their relationship with nature, rooted in centuries of heritage and adaptation to a harsh climate (Bjørst, 2012). In some cases, this ability to master the environment reflects what is often described as Kalaallit’s frontier spirit (Beyer Broch, 2020).

The climate change narrative frames resilience primarily as economic adaptation—expanding fisheries, tourism, and resource extraction in response to changing environmental conditions. However, resilience-building involves more than market adaptation; it also requires localized climate governance, Indigenous knowledge integration, and long-term sustainability planning. Without centering these factors, the narrative risks framing resilience as a market-driven outcome rather than a policy process.

Discussion: resilience, colonial legacies and development pathways

Kalaallit Nunaat's policy narratives reflect different approaches to regional development, yet they share a common goal: resilience in the face of economic, social, and environmental change. The independence narrative prioritizes economic self-sufficiency as the pathway to political sovereignty. The regional inequality narrative highlights the need to counteract territorial disparities, particularly between Nuuk and smaller settlements. The climate change narrative promotes economic growth within international environmental frameworks, while the socioeconomic narrative emphasizes education, employment, and social well-being as prerequisites for sustainable development.

While these narratives offer distinct framings, they do not exist in isolation; rather, they reflect historically embedded colonial structures that continue to shape Kalaallit Nunaat's governance and economic strategies. The pursuit of independence is often framed within Western models of statehood, emphasizing market integration and extractive industries while overlooking Indigenous governance traditions. Similarly, regional disparities and centralization stem from colonial-era policies that reorganized Inuit communities to fit European administrative structures. A decolonial approach to resilience would require challenging these inherited models and centering local agency, knowledge systems, and self-determined development pathways.

Resilience through a decolonial lens

Policy narratives can shape how Kalaallit Nunaat's policymakers and civil servants perceive their challenges and strategize solutions. These narratives emphasize different problems, causes, moral judgments, and preferred solutions (Entman, 1993). Some of this framing is explicit. For example, the narratives highlight key issues such as national (political and economic) dependence, regional inequality, socio-economic challenges, and climate change as central problem frames. Each of these is acknowledged as a legitimate issue requiring attention, with the shared goal of building a resilient Kalaallit Nunaat capable of facing a future marked by multiple challenges. However, these frames also implicitly involve underlying structures of belief, perception, and appreciation that influence and shape policy positions (Gamson and Modigliani, 1989; Schön and Rein, 1994). These dynamics can have significant consequences for how actors build resilience, what knowledge is considered relevant, and who is deemed a logical party to involve in decision-making (Wardekker, 2021). To explore these implicit framings and their potential impact on resilience-building, we will draw on the contrasting logics of *system resilience* versus *community resilience* (Wardekker, 2021, 2023). These two framings influence which solutions are prioritized, whose knowledge is valued and how governance structures evolve.

System resilience emphasizes stability, centralized governance, and institutional capacity to absorb shocks and maintain function (Walker et al., 2004). It tends to prioritize state-driven policies, economic expansion, and infrastructural investments as pathways to resilience. The independence and climate change narratives align with this framing, as they focus on Kalaallit Nunaat's ability to function within global economic and governance systems. However, this approach risks perpetuating colonial-era dependencies by prioritizing resource extraction, global trade, and external policy frameworks over Indigenous self-determined governance (Fanon, 1961; Kim, 2012).

In contrast, community resilience is rooted in local agency, cultural adaptation, and self-organized responses to change (Berkes and Ross, 2013). It emphasizes the social, cultural, and economic well-being of communities, focusing on Indigenous knowledge, participatory decision-making, and intergenerational adaptation strategies. The regional inequality and socioeconomic narratives incorporate elements of community resilience by acknowledging the importance of local governance and community-led solutions. However, these narratives still operate within state-centric policy structures, where decision-making remains centralized and local voices struggle to gain influence.

Decolonizing policy narratives with competing visions of governance

Kalaallit Nunaat's policy narratives reflect competing visions of self-determination and governance. The independence narrative adopts a system-oriented framing, positioning economic and political sovereignty as the means to overcome colonial dependency on Denmark. It prioritizes legal, economic, and corporate structures to align Kalaallit Nunaat with global geopolitical and financial systems. However, as Fanon (1961) argues, postcolonial states often replicate colonial economic logics, reinforcing extractive economies rather than fostering self-determined, community-led governance.

The regional inequality and socio-economic narratives challenge this top-down vision, arguing that true resilience requires local agency, participatory governance, and equitable regional development. While still framed within the goal of independence, these narratives highlight the structural consequences of colonial centralization, where Nuuk's dominance in governance and economic decision-making limits the autonomy of smaller communities (Nuttall, 2019b). This reflects what Kuokkanen (2017) terms "the politics of representation without transformation," where Indigenous self-governance is acknowledged in discourse but constrained by inherited colonial institutions.

The climate change narrative, while advocating a sustainable development path, remains system-oriented, aligning Kalaallit Nunaat's resilience with global environmental frameworks and economic adaptation strategies. This framing risks sidelining Indigenous ecological governance, which emphasizes relational sustainability, non-extractive economies, and intergenerational stewardship (Whyte, 2017). The narrative positions Kalaallit Nunaat's adaptive capacity as an economic asset, but as Gad (2017) describes in his analysis of sovereignty games, such positioning often serves to negotiate Kalaallit Nunaat's autonomy within global power structures rather than centering Inuit environmental governance models.

While all four narratives emphasize resilience and independence, their differences reveal tensions between state-centric, development-driven strategies and community-based, decolonial alternatives. When the independence narrative prioritizes extractive industries and short-term economic growth, it risks compromising the long-term resilience of communities by reinforcing dependencies on global markets rather than strengthening localized economies and governance systems.

Impacts on knowledge use and resilience approaches

The framing of resilience in these policy narratives determines which forms of knowledge are valued and whose voices shape

governance. System resilience privileges scientific modeling, top-down policy tools, and economic forecasting, aligning with Western governance structures (Walker et al., 2004). In contrast, community resilience draws from land-based knowledge, relational governance, and participatory decision-making, which have historically been marginalized in policy processes (Berkas and Ross, 2013).

The independence and climate change narratives reflect system resilience, emphasizing national institutions and global alignments, whereas the regional inequality and socio-economic narratives incorporate elements of community resilience, recognizing the role of local governance, traditional knowledge, and community-led adaptation strategies. However, even in these narratives, Indigenous perspectives are often framed within existing institutional logics rather than serving as transformative alternatives (Kim, 2012; Tennberg et al., 2020).

This distinction carries critical governance implications. System resilience models reinforce centralized decision-making, positioning Kalaallit Nunaat's national government as the key actor in negotiating sovereignty and economic independence. Conversely, community resilience approaches advocate for decentralized governance, local leadership, and policy co-creation with Indigenous communities. As Wardekker (2021) suggests, resilience strategies that fail to integrate community agency risk becoming mechanisms for reinforcing systemic inequalities rather than addressing the colonial legacies embedded in governance structures.

Towards decolonial policy research

Kalaallit Nunaat's policy landscape is shaped by complex postcolonial sovereignty dynamics, where political aspirations for independence are negotiated within existing colonial structures and global governance frameworks (Gad, 2017). Research that centers Kalaallit voices, Indigenous governance models, and land-based knowledge can challenge these colonial influences and reshape resilience-building processes. A decolonial approach requires shifting from Western-centric development models toward frameworks that prioritize community agency, relational governance, and Indigenous epistemologies (Kuokkanen, 2017).

Power and resilience: shaping Kalaallit Nunaat's future

The role of power in resilience framing is evident in how dominant narratives surrounding climate crises and economic development in Kalaallit Nunaat have historically limited Inuit agency and autonomy. These narratives have reinforced harmful stereotypes and power imbalances between those who hold traditional knowledge and those in institutional power. However, as Bjørst (2012) argues, alternative pathways to empowerment are possible. Recognizing the agency of Inuit communities to navigate and adapt to challenges using their traditional knowledge and practices is crucial for building a resilient future.

Gad (2017) introduces the concept of postcolonial sovereignty games, where Kalaallit Nunaat's pursuit of self-determination is strategically negotiated through relationships with Denmark, the European Union, and global economic actors. This strategic balancing act allows Kalaallit Nunaat to assert agency while maintaining

economic dependencies, creating a form of partial sovereignty that is shaped by both internal political struggles and external pressures.

From a decolonial policy perspective, this means that Kalaallit Nunaat policy narratives on economic development, regional inequality, and climate change are not purely domestically driven but are also entangled in global sovereignty negotiations. While sovereignty games offer opportunities for maneuvering, they also risk reinforcing external dependencies by framing resource extraction, market integration, and governance reforms within colonial-capitalist logics rather than Indigenous governance frameworks.

Decolonial governance: beyond representation toward structural change

Former minister Vittus Qujaukitsoq's critique of international regulations highlights the power dynamics inherent in global environmental governance. By valuing Kalaallit Nunaat knowledge and expertise, decision-making processes can become more effective and equitable. The Government of Kalaallit Nunaat's adoption of a green ambition in October 2021 reflects a shift toward sustainable and resilient development that not only aligns with the global green transition agenda but also acknowledges the unique challenges and opportunities faced by Kalaallit Nunaat's communities. This underscores the need for equitable and inclusive governance that incorporates the diverse perspectives of allrightsholders, particularly those traditionally marginalized.

Kuokkanen (2017) argues that Indigenous self-determination is often reduced to political representation rather than structural change. In Kalaallit Nunaat, while Inuit leaders occupy key political positions, the governance system remains heavily influenced by Danish legal-administrative frameworks. A truly decolonial policy approach would go beyond political participation and instead reshape institutional structures to align with Kalaallit Nunaat's cultural, social, and economic realities.

The legacy of colonialism persists in Kalaallit Nunaat's policy frameworks, which continue to prioritize Western systems over Indigenous community and cultural practices. This inclination toward Western governance styles and priorities often marginalizes community-based practices that are not seen as contributing to national economic development (Nuttall, 2019b; Kuokkanen, 2017; Ren et al., 2020). Gad's (2017) analysis of sovereignty games underscores how policy narratives in Kalaallit Nunaat are shaped by both internal political dynamics and external power structures. A shift toward decolonial policy research would require reframing governance beyond Western-centric models, strengthening Kalaallit Nunaat's agency in international decision-making, and recognizing Indigenous knowledge as a foundation for resilience. This means that resilience is not just about adaptation but about reclaiming power, restructuring institutions, and resisting colonial dependencies. Still, viewing Kalaallit Nunaat's culture as solely traditional or entirely shaped by Danish systems oversimplifies the reality. Instead, an inclusive perspective is necessary—one that recognizes the interplay between traditional Inuit practices and Danish government structures in shaping Kalaallit Nunaat's cultural and policy frameworks.

Adopting an inclusive perspective provides a deeper understanding of the power dynamics that shape Kalaallit Nunaat's policy narratives and targets. It reveals how internal and external actors influence the policy landscape, and how the narratives that prevail reflect the interests and priorities of those with the most power. This understanding can inform

efforts to promote a more equitable and sustainable path for Kalaallit Nunaat, one that embraces both traditional Inuit practices and modern governance frameworks to create a resilient and inclusive future.

Conclusion

This paper analyzed official documents to identify four key policy narratives shaping regional development in Kalaallit Nunaat: independence, regional inequality, socio-economic and demographic challenges, and climate change. These narratives reflect diverse perspectives and approaches, with some prioritizing system-oriented strategies and others emphasizing community-based approaches.

Each narrative offers distinct focal points. The independence narrative centers on strengthening political, legal, and economic structures to enhance national resilience. The regional inequality narrative highlights governance and economic disparities calling for more inclusive decision-making and regional empowerment. The socio-economic narrative emphasizes the importance of community-led solutions to address demographic and social challenges. Finally, the climate change narrative advocates for a green and sustainable development pathway aligning economic growth with environmental responsibility. While all narratives prioritize independence, they differ in their views on the role of local communities, governance and the long-term development strategies.

A critical takeaway from the discussion is that resilience is not only a technical or economic issue but also a deeply political and structural one. The independence narrative, when focused on short-term economic gains from resource extraction, risks undermining community resilience and long-term sustainability. In contrast, the regional inequality and socio-economic narratives suggest that achieving true resilience requires greater local agency, Indigenous-led governance, and community-driven development strategies.

For Kalaallit Nunaat to build a more inclusive and sustainable future, its policy frameworks must acknowledge and prioritize Indigenous knowledge systems alongside existing governance structures. This means:

- Moving beyond economic dependency models that mirror colonial-era structures and instead fostering self-determined, diversified economic pathways.
- Ensuring community-driven decision-making that empowers local actors rather than reinforcing top-down governance structures.
- Bridging system-oriented resilience with community resilience, ensuring that policy strategies do not marginalize Indigenous voices and local perspectives.

While Kalaallit Nunaat is actively navigating postcolonial sovereignty dynamics, meaningful decolonization requires not just political autonomy but also structural transformation in how policies are designed, who influences them, and whose knowledge is valued. Future research and policymaking should focus on co-creating development strategies with Indigenous communities, ensuring that resilience-building is not merely about adapting to external pressures but about strengthening self-determined governance and cultural continuity.

Ultimately, a decolonial approach to policymaking—one that centers Indigenous agency, governance, and epistemologies—is essential for building a Kalaallit Nunaatic future that is not only

economically resilient but also socially and culturally self-determined. By reframing resilience beyond system-centered, globalized development models, Kalaallit Nunaat has the opportunity to lead a policy shift that truly reflects local aspirations, environmental stewardship, and long-term sustainability.

A decolonial resilience narrative would require integrating community resilience perspectives more fully into Kalaallit Nunaat's policymaking. This means moving beyond economic growth models inherited from colonial governance and instead recognizing the legitimacy of Indigenous-led governance, subsistence economies, and land-based knowledge systems. By shifting resilience from a technocratic goal to a process of political and cultural empowerment, Kalaallit Nunaat could move toward a model of development that is both self-determined and sustainable.

Data availability statement

The datasets generated and analysed during the current study are not publicly available due to the internal nature of the coding process and data storage procedures. All policy documents reviewed are listed in the reference list. Data access may be considered on a case-by-case basis upon reasonable request. Please direct inquiries to leneisja.jungsberg@nordregio.org.

Author contributions

LJ: Conceptualization, Funding acquisition, Project administration, Resources, Supervision, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. LO: Data curation, Investigation, Methodology, Validation, Writing – review & editing. AK: Supervision, Writing – review & editing. AW: Conceptualization, Supervision, Validation, Writing – review & editing.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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