



On Micropolitics: Climate adaptation and Indigenous governance in Western Alaska

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Abstract

Climate adaptation for Indigenous communities is not as simple as making good policy; it is equally about how policy is implemented and how collaboration unfolds between settler governments and Indigenous stakeholders. Rural Alaska Native villages are among the most environmentally threatened communities in the United States. Their ability to effectively manage environmental change and preserve sovereignty depends upon successful collaboration with a range of stakeholders, especially federal agencies. For more than two decades, academics and government agencies have documented a consistent pattern of failures, particularly by federal actors, to effectively manage adaptation challenges. These obstacles are sometimes misrepresented as policy failures. While poor policy is certainly involved in these poor outcomes, this paper highlights a set of barriers to successful collaboration that are not policy issues, per se, but rather micropolitical issues; that is, they pertain to the *conduct* of government in the context of Tribal relationships. Unaddressed, these micropolitical issues have created obstacles to Alaska Native communities' self-determination as they adapt to a changing landscape. These barriers are explored in a case study drawn from Typhoon Merbok, which struck Western Alaska in 2022, and empirically grounded in a series of interviews and participant observation with experts, elders, elected officials, and Tribal staff. This article concludes with several concrete recommendations to improve the practice of domestic diplomacy between Indigenous communities and colonial governments.

Keywords Climate adaptation · Vulnerability · Governance · Indigenous · Climate change · Justice · Alaska

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1 Introduction

Rural environmental adaptation poses urgent challenges for policymakers and societies. The World Bank estimates that as many as 216 million people in vulnerable regions will be internally displaced by climate-related events by 2050 (Clement et al. 2021). The scale and urgency of this multi-faceted problem require aligning governments and NGOs to support community-scale adaptation while minimizing suffering and loss of autonomy. This is particularly true for Indigenous communities, whose ongoing battles for self-determination are doubly threatened, as both environmental change and adaptation (e.g., forced relocation) can impinge upon sovereignty.

Climate change, with its dynamic hazard landscape and shifting baselines, poses a unique set of challenges for disaster response and hazard mitigation (Wilby and Keenan 2012). Many well-intentioned rural climate adaptation efforts fall short of their goals, often due to a combination of poor program design, ineffective goal-setting, and fraught power dynamics (Pennington 2023). As a result, many governments and institutions are developing novel legal, bureaucratic, and technical frameworks for adaptation and resilience for threatened communities. The past decade has seen a proliferation of such strategies and policies to improve environmental adaptation and reduce maladaptation (Barnett and O'Neill 2010; Ulibarri et al. 2022). These new tools target diverse social and political landscapes, from small island nations (McLeod et al. 2019) to large cities (Anguelovski et al. 2014). Given the breadth of human societies and the myriad manifestations of environmental change, strategies that work well in one context are not necessarily well-suited to another.

This paper uses the concept of *micropolitics* to draw attention to a category of procedural failures in environmental adaptation that are not policy failures per se, but failures in the implementation of these policies, particularly when deployed in cross-cultural or colonial settings. These failures often arise in mundane issues that are missed in the high-level design of the policies in question. They are adjacent to, but separate from, issues of policy, goodwill, resource scarcity, or technical possibility. Micropolitics are not *micro* because they are small or unimportant, but rather because they are fine-grained and easily overlooked. Resolving micropolitical issues requires improved attention to the lived experiences of threatened communities and the dynamics that govern their interactions with settler governments.

In the specific context of environmental adaptation, micropolitical issues include (but are hardly limited to) substandard communication between communities and governments (Marino 2015); failure to incorporate systems of traditional knowledge and governance into adaptation plans (Raymond-Yakoubian et al. 2017); setting unrealistic expectations for small communities' technical capacity (Minnes and Vodden 2017); failure to build trust (Whyte 2020); and simple ignorance of historical contexts that necessitate an intersectional approach to adaptation planning (Marino 2012; Marter-Kenyon 2020; Whyte 2018).

This article explores the micropolitics of climate adaptation with a focus on the Siberian Yupik and Iñupiaq villages of Western Alaska.¹ It begins with a background on environmen-

¹ Following local convention, the terms "Tribe," "Tribal government," "community," and "village," are used in the following manner: *Tribe*: A federally-recognized Indigenous nation within the United States, inclusive of its enrolled members. *Tribal government*: The institutions, composed of Tribal members, exercising authority for Tribal affairs. *Community*: The broader social context of a given Tribe, extending beyond those who are enrolled members, and encompassing family and social relations that extend beyond the limited

tal adaptation challenges faced by Tribal governments. This is followed by an overview of micropolitics, noting how they appear in the process of environmental adaptation. A case study then investigates Tribal-federal cooperation in response to Typhoon Merbok, a record-breaking storm in September 2022 that caused major damage to dozens of Western Alaska Native communities. We conclude with a set of recommendations for specific micropolitical issues in environmental adaptation. These recommendations will have varying degrees of transferability to other geographic and political contexts.

2 Background

2.1 Environmental adaptation in Rural Alaska

There are 229 federally recognized Tribes in Alaska, each of which has a nation-to-nation relationship with the United States (Case and Voluck 2002; US Government Accountability Office 2022). Most of these Tribes are associated with a single Alaska Native village, small communities with fewer than 1,000 residents. These communities are distributed across the state, itself an area three times the size of France. Most villages are not connected to the North American road system and are accessed instead by a combination of small airplanes, snowmobiles, and boats.

Alaska Native communities are the traditional stewards of millions of acres of land and water, encompassing tundra, coastal rainforest, boreal forest, marine ecosystems, and broad river deltas. They also face some of the most urgent threats from environmental change of any region in the United States. Rising seas, melting permafrost, intensifying storms, reductions in sea ice, and changes to the availability of plants and animals harvested for subsistence have created dire threats for many of these communities. One report by the federal government identifies that the majority of these villages are affected by flooding and erosion (US Government Accountability Office 2009).

These environmental hazards are inextricably linked to the colonial history of Alaska Native villages. Until the late 19th or early 20th centuries, many contemporary village sites were inhabited only seasonally (Berardi 1999; Berger 1985). Before then, Alaska Native communities practiced a form of seasonal mobility. Many Iñupiat, for instance, spent the winters and springs close to frozen shorelines or rivers and then moved to higher ground in the summers and autumns. When the US colonial government tightened its grip on Alaska at the turn of the 20th century, it forced Alaska Natives to remain in one place for the majority of each year by building schools and mandating that children attend them (Berardi 1999; Hirshberg 2008). These schools, along with churches and other buildings, were erected hastily by visiting Non-Native workers, most of whom arrived by boat and began construction close to the landing site for convenience. As a result, many Alaska Native villages today are located on barrier islands, sand spits, or immediately astride rivers [Marino 2012]. Traditional technologies of environmental adaptation and mobility were replaced over a short period of generations by a more sedentary existence. (Many Alaska Natives still practice some seasonal mobility, for example, by visiting “fish camp” in the summer, away from village centers (Berardi 1999; Deur et al. 2018; Hirshberg 2008; Johnson et al. 2021)].

geography of one Tribe. Village: Shorthand for “Alaska Native village.” A small, majority-Alaska Native community (usually fewer than 1,500 residents) in rural Alaska, inclusive of its land and infrastructure.

From the outset, environmental hazards posed an existential threat to many of these communities. The Iñupiat villages of Shaktoolik and Point Hope relocated to higher ground in 1975 and 1977, respectively (Johnson and Gray 2014; Sakakibara 2008); both villages are now faced with the prospect of relocating for a second time (GAO 2009). Across the state, Alaska Native villages were made vulnerable by historical processes, recently exacerbated by climatic factors (Kashwan and Ribot 2021). A report by the US Government Accountability Office (GAO), a public agency and self-described watchdog of the federal government, succinctly summarizes this history: “In many cases, Native villages occupy their current precarious locations because the federal government built schools in what were seasonal encampments and mandated that Alaska Native children attend those schools” (US GAO, 2022: 7).

In 2009, the GAO government identified 31 Alaska Native villages facing “imminent threats” from climate change, for which wholesale relocation may be required in the medium-term future. In the time since, just two Alaska Native villages, Newtok and Kivalina, have begun the process of building infrastructure in a designated relocation site. Of those two, only the community of Newtok has built and occupied homes at the new site (Schwing 2023b).

Despite a torrent of media attention (Bennett 2021; Herrmann 2019; Marino 2012), many rural Alaska Natives continue to feel abandoned and marginalized by a “distant bureaucracy” (Marino and Ribot 2012). Systems that are putatively designed to aid these communities, such as federal grant programs, often prove to be inaccessible, or navigable only with the assistance of professional grant writers and civil engineers. The fundamental principle of self-determination — which is critical to effective Alaska Native government (Cornell and Kalt 2003) — is complicated by a bureaucracy that is broadly out of step with the administrative capacity of small sovereign communities, Indigenous or settler. In 2020, the Alaska Federation of Natives approved a resolution stating, “The regulations and requirements of most federal programs, including FEMA and the Army Corps of Engineers, are developed for the contiguous United States [i.e., excluding Alaska]. By design, they prevent vital resources from being available to our communities” (Increased Coordination 2020).

To date, the federal government’s response to environmental change in Alaska Native villages has been, by its own admission, inadequately coordinated and underfunded (US GAO, 2022). Several reports by the GAO have pointed to these failures and recommended pathways for change, many of which do not require acts of Congress and could be enacted through executive and agency action (US Government Accountability Office 2003, 2009, 2020, 2022). These recommendations, and the principles underlying them, are echoed in other government publications (Status of Tribes and Climate Change 2021; 2018 National Climate Assessment, Ch. 15). A number of academic publications have also pointed to shortcomings and pitfalls in current systems (Bergstrom et al. 2022; Bronen and Chapin 2013; Marino 2012, 2015; Pennington 2023; Ristroph 2017, 2021; Shearer 2012).

Some of the most frequently cited barriers to environmental adaptation include (1) the high cost of construction in rural Alaska, where the estimated of relocating a single village exceeds US\$100 million in many instances (US Army Corps of Engineers, Alaska District 2006); (2) a lack of funding allocated to Alaska Native communities by government entities relative to the need for infrastructure development; (3) poor coordination between a multitude of federal agencies with overlapping mandates; and (4) barriers to accessing federal funds, e.g., through cost matching requirements.

These are policy issues. But behind these hurdles is a historical and cultural backdrop of fraught engagement that creates chronic obstacles to Alaska Native governments partnering with federal agencies with the capacity to fund infrastructure-scale projects. The friction of working collaboratively across a vast geographic and cultural distance, from rural Alaska to Washington, D.C., underpins the feeling of disenfranchisement in village communities. This leads to poor engagement and coordination, undermining service delivery and disparaging the “trust responsibility” (Case and Voluck 2002) that the federal government has with Alaska Native communities.

3 Methods

This article draws on one of the author’s Genevieve Rock decades of professional experience working as a grant writer for the Native Village of Shaktoolik, an Iñupiaq community in Norton Sound. It is also empirically grounded in twelve months of multi-sited ethnography (Falzon 2009; Marcus 1995) in the Norton Sound region of Western Alaska, conducted in 2022 and 2023. Over 50 semi-structured interviews were conducted with Tribal leaders, Tribal government staff, employees at regional Alaska Native nonprofits, community leaders, and elders. Interviews were supplemented with periods of participant observation (following Ingold 2014, 2017) with Tribal government staff during repeated stays (1–3 weeks) at two Alaska Native villages in the region. This involved spending time in Tribal government offices, helping with various tasks, including grant writing, distributing food for a community food bank, and cross-referencing documents for annual tax filings.

To maintain the anonymity of research participants in these small communities, the names of all Alaska Native participants (and their villages) have been withheld (a practice also used by Skewes and Lewis 2016). Many participants expressed a preference for anonymity, with some voicing concerns that speaking candidly about government processes might harm their communities’ efforts to secure funding and other assistance from key stakeholders. Given the small size of these communities, the only way to ensure appropriate anonymization was to anonymize at the level of the region, not the village. That said, the decision to anonymize participant contributions should not be mistaken for generalization. The challenges faced by Norton Sound’s 17 villages are not universally shared.

3.1 Case study: typhoon merbok

In September 2022, a typhoon spun out of the tropical Pacific Ocean and barreled toward the overheated Bering Sea, where unusually warm surface water temperatures sustained the cyclone as it traveled north, eventually crossing the Arctic Circle. Weather instruments logged the lowest atmospheric pressure ever recorded in the Bering Sea in September. Across Western Alaska, a severe storm surge caused flooding, erosion, and widespread property damage in more than 35 communities (Pacific Coastal and Marine Science Center 2022) (Fig. 1).

Within days of the storm, political dignitaries descended upon the region, traveling by military helicopter and touring damaged towns. This included Alaska’s at-large congresswoman, Mary Peltola, the state’s senior senator, Lisa Murkowski, and the head of the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA). At a town hall in the regional hub of Nome,

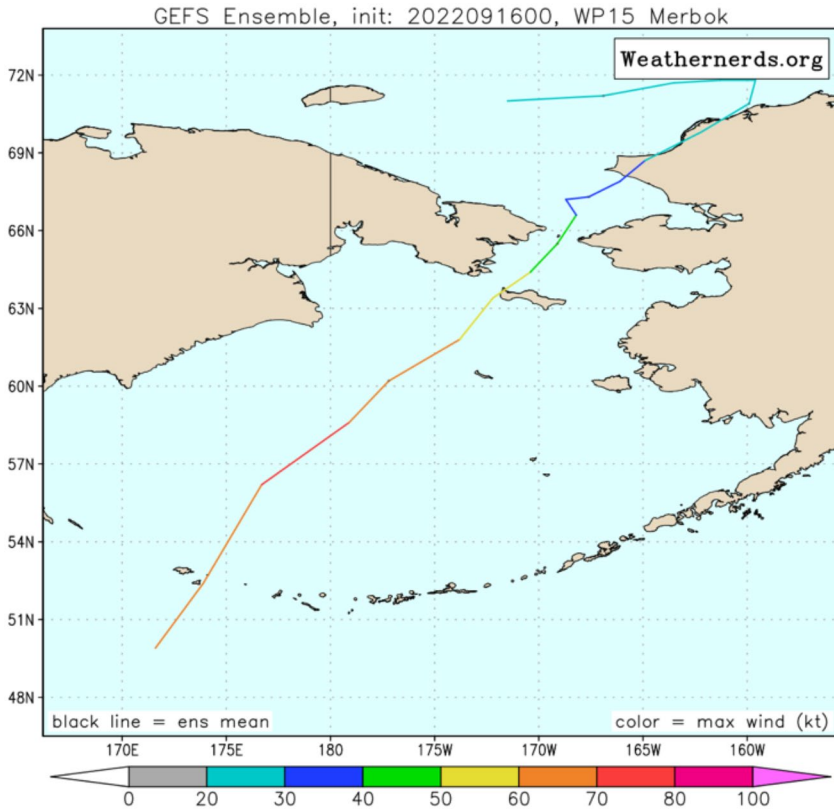


Fig. 1 Source: https://www.weathernerds.org/tc_guidance/storm.html?tcid=WP15

they took the stage in the community center and promised a swift response, urging residents to apply for federal disaster relief aid.

But their words of encouragement were tempered with caution. The head of FEMA, Deanna Criswell, explained, “We do want to help; our processes *can* be complicated.” Climate change made its way into the conversation, and Senator Murkowski offered a candid answer: “We’ve got a lot of planning work to do. It is worth noting that on the federal side, we’re starting to think more proactively about how to build toward resilience.” This sentiment may have landed poorly with Tribal leaders, who have been working to anticipate environmental hazards for decades, often with a multi-generational perspective on regional and local changes (Rock 2023).

The town hall lasted less than an hour, and the DC entourage left immediately thereafter. The region’s residents began trying to navigate a maze of relief programs. The government and agencies these leaders represented—and the rank-and-file employees with the capacity to issue actual checks for damaged property—proved much harder to come by than the media-facing politicians. In the immediate aftermath of Typhoon Merbok, the federal government made efforts to help Western Alaskans apply for the aid the elected officials had mentioned—a process that proved to be rife with micropolitical complications.

FEMA commissioned a translation firm to create a brochure with instructions on how to apply for aid into Iñupiaq and Central Yup'ik, two Alaska Native languages spoken across the area damaged by Merbok. The Yup'ik translations were unintelligible to locals. According to an expert at the University of Alaska Fairbanks' Alaska Native Languages Center, a line of text meant to refer to the Small Business Association translated as: "That one said that I should draw a line on the ice when he gets close" (Schwing 2023a). The expert hypothesized that the translator "just lifted full phrases from a compilation of language and folklore from Far East Russia." That was the Yup'ik version. Its Iñupiaq counterpart was printed in Inuktitut, an alphabet of syllabic characters used by some Inuit in Canada, not in the US. Iñupiaq, by contrast, uses the Latin alphabet. To Iñupiaq speakers in Alaska, the symbols were as meaningless as they were to most others in the United States (Fig. 2).

The other challenges were more mundane, although arguably posed greater hurdles. The regional newspaper wrote a 2,000-word article attempting to explain the kaleidoscope of federal aid programs ["Even now, two months after ex-Typhoon Merbok struck western Alaska, the process of applying for disaster assistance left many confused" (Loewi 2022)]. There is Individual Assistance and Public Assistance, which require separate application processes through FEMA. Businesses cannot apply to FEMA and must instead ask for loans from the Small Business Association (SBA). There are state programs, but applicants will only be considered for those after running the gauntlet of FEMA programs. But a spokes-



Fig. 2 A FEMA brochure printed in the Inuktitut alphabet. Inuktitut is not spoken in the United States. (Inuktitut speakers interviewed for an Alaskan news article reported that the brochure is unintelligible.)

person for the SBA told the *regional newspaper*, it is “vitaly important” for applicants to apply to both state and FEMA programs. The SBA offers loans, not aid, which took many in the region by surprise. Even the FEMA webpage confusingly advised, “You are not required to take out a loan, but failure to fill out the application may prevent you from receiving certain types of FEMA funding” (quoted in Loewi 2022). Many would-be applicants were confused—would applying for assistance put them into debt?

There are income thresholds, automatic referrals, appeals processes, resubmissions, and a host of eligibility requirements. Success within this system requires a peculiar combination of technical literacy, tenacity, spare time, self-advocacy, and optimism. Many would-be applicants “are deterred by the amount of paperwork or fall through the cracks” (Loewi 2022).

In a particularly strange turn, FEMA announced on February 1, 2023, that it was reopening the aid application that had closed in December—the new deadline was three days later, on February 4 (FEMA Region 10, 2023a). It was later extended to February 6. On the morning of February 6, FEMA posted on Twitter, “Those submitting late applications will be asked to provide a letter explaining why they were unable to apply during the application period” (FEMA Region 10, 2023b). Practical questions swirl around this sort of agency protocol: how were private citizens or Tribal public officials meant to know about the extension? And why did the window between announcing the reopening and the subsequent closing last only six days, of which only four were business days?

“It was all frustrating because there was just no uniform guidance or direct resource to understand” the aid programs, a village environmental coordinator explained. Her community had suffered substantial losses due to Merbok but ultimately did not apply for aid. The process was too cumbersome and opaque. Instead, they applied for relief from the regional nonprofit Tribal consortium, Kawerak. That application was a two-page PDF file, which could be submitted by email, fax, or hardcopy. (In rural Alaska, fax machines are helpful alternatives when poor internet connections interfere with email.) The phone number listed for those seeking assistance with the application lists the names of two designated contacts—indicating accountability to specific people, rather than an institution. Whereas the FEMA system was complicated and anonymous, the regional nonprofit built a system that was relatively straightforward and personal, with clearly accountable representatives who are also members of the relatively small Norton Sound community.

Even if the federal bureaucracy surrounding disaster aid were more navigable to those without specialist training, colonial principles remain inscribed in the rules governing relief allocation. For instance, FEMA does not provide aid for damages sustained by “non-primary residences” (Loewi 2022; Pennington 2023; pp. 247–248); this includes the cabins at subsistence fish camps that are commonplace across Western Alaska. Snowmobiles and all-terrain vehicles, which are the primary means of transportation in most villages in the region, are classified as “recreational vehicles,” and are also not eligible for compensation. One village president and Tribal administrator explained in an interview that applicants faced a significant hurdle when they were told that their applications could not be processed without house numbers. In a village of fewer than 300 people, where mail is only collected from the village post office, house numbers were never necessary. (Other villages in the region do not have street names, which has posed issues for the distribution of federal aid following the Covid-19 emergency.)

One Tribal president in the region explained: “You have to go through the right formalities to get the things addressed. You have to fill out a certain form. Things like that. It just really doesn’t make sense... all we’re really capable of doing right here is hands-on, trying to get things taken care of in the spur of the moment.” A president of a separate Tribal government found it frustrating that government employees seemed ignorant of the importance of subsistence equipment (like fish racks and all-terrain vehicles) to local ways of life and culture: “One of the things that is really difficult to convey is the loss of food security.”

Across the region, the prospects of engaging productively with FEMA seemed dim. Tribal leaders, with limited capacity to track the complicated and lawyerly processes for acquiring aid, were more apt to fall back into patterns of self-sufficiency, skeptical that the federal government’s systems—which have traditionally been hostile to Indigenous livelihoods (Whyte 2020)—had meaningfully changed in ways that would make the difficult process of engagement worthwhile.

At least one village in the region reported a different experience. Following the typhoon, several FEMA representatives were dispatched to the village, where they spent at least a week helping residents apply for aid and address a number of hurdles, such as the lack of house numbers or physical titles to homes that were passed down through generations. Tribal leaders in the village reported that this was helpful, even though the FEMA employees were powerless to address certain barriers, such as the inability to deliver compensation for damage at fish camps. In interviews across the region, several Tribal leaders and community members hypothesized that this village’s experience was influenced by the simple fact one of its residents is a lawmaker in the state legislature.

The problematic response to Typhoon Merbok illustrates how federal protocols are failing Tribal governments when environmental pressures are most dire. But the cause does not appear to be a lack of action or ambition at the highest levels of government. The state’s most senior elected officials demonstrated a keen awareness of the scope of the problems. “Is this the beginning of a new normal?” mused Senator Murkowski from the lectern of the town hall in Nome. “And if so, how do we prepare?”

Rather, the problems in the ineffective response to Merbok lay in the connective tissue between political leadership and communities: the complex, mundane, and often-overlooked bureaucratic structures tasked with delivering on policy directives. As exemplified by Merbok, these structures can derail efforts to deliver aid to vulnerable communities, and in the process, continue a legacy of disenfranchisement.

3.2 Analysis: identifying micropolitics

In the existing academic and government literature, commonly proposed interventions to improve the delivery of environmental assistance are well-informed and urgent. But these recommendations sometimes fall short of engaging the more mundane and micropolitical barriers to effective collaboration with Indigenous communities, such as Alaska Native villages. Issues that seem distant from federal offices in Washington, DC, can pose significant challenges in rural Alaska. These include, for example, intermittent Internet access, English spoken as a second language, misaligned expectations around trust and relationship-building (Whyte 2020), and the need to spend days to weeks at a time away from village centers to fish and hunt (Marino 2015). Effectively assisting with environmental adaptation—and

indeed, any issue—in rural Alaska requires attending to these place-based and culturally-specific dimensions, and the micropolitics that arise between them.

A list of micropolitical barriers, with examples and exceptions, is presented in Table 1. Neither the list, nor the exceptions, are exhaustive. Table 2 presents a list of non-micropolitical barriers — also non-exhaustively.

Alaska Native villages face micropolitical barriers to successfully engaging federal programs even when those programs (e.g., those within the Bureau of Indian Affairs) are specifically designed to render aid to Indigenous communities. Often, these barriers are technological, cultural, or pragmatic in ways that are not legible (Scott 2008) to agency staff in cities in the Lower 48. These barriers are *micropolitical* because they are not readily visible to policymakers but nevertheless pose major challenges in the practice of policy execution and service delivery.

In this case, micropolitics is about the *conduct* of government rather than its overarching goals. As such, they are easily overlooked or even ignored by high-level officials in Congress and the agencies tasked with delivering services. Nevertheless, they underlie the conditions for success or failure in many communities, as was the case following Typhoon Merbok.

For example, many Tribal leaders are limited in their capacity to manage a bureaucratic landscape of tools that are required for successful funding applications. This includes, for instance, the often-cited SAMS.gov website that is required for federal funding and procurement. As a result of these complicated systems, some small villages are only able to succeed in applying for federal assistance by hiring outside consultants who can navigate the labyrinth of bureaucracy involved in federal funding. For a glimpse of the challenge, navigate to www.grants.gov to see the web portal through which most federal grant applications are submitted. Despite the evident best intentions, the portal is a complex maze of information best suited to specialists. The creation of several different “technical assistance centers” or “adaptation centers” has helped some communities overcome these hurdles, but the reliance upon outside experts may still impinge upon communities’ capacity to exercise self-determination by articulating their needs in nontechnical language.

Individually, several of these challenges have also been identified by other researchers. But brought together, this pattern of seemingly mundane obstacles may collectively disenfranchise many Alaska Native villages. Micropolitics function by rewarding those communities that are best able to succeed within externally imposed colonial structures. As a result, Alaska Native communities are subjected to a particular form of neoliberal and colonial governmentality (Coulthard 2014), whereby their consideration for funding is made contingent upon adopting an externally-imposed political subjectivity—for example, as clients of engineering firms and grant-writing specialists who are fluent in the institutional language of metric tons and dollars. To receive aid, Alaska Native communities are pressured to adopt the bureaucratic language and governmental forms of their colonizers.

This form of governmentality echoes what Agrawal terms “the soft hammer of self-regulation” (Agrawal 2005; p. 15). When micropolitics are unacknowledged, Alaska Native communities and Tribes are framed as responsible for a lack of competitive funding applications, absolving federal agencies of the need to actively render assistance. When grant-making is too onerous, or calls and emails to federal agencies are not returned (or are only returned once, perhaps when the local cell towers are down), the blame is readily shifted onto already-disenfranchised communities.

Table 1 Summary of certain micropolitical barriers to climate adaption in rural Alaska Native communities. An incomplete list

Barrier	Example(s)	Notable exception(s)
Unreliable communications infrastructure	Unreliable internet connection, power outages, intermittent cell phone signal. (Marino 2015)	None known.
English spoken as a second language	Indigenous languages (e.g., Central Yup'ik or Siberian Yupik) are spoken as a first language in many communities. Federal employees are rarely bilingual. Documents are rarely translated. (Rivkin et al. 2013)	The BIA Tribal Climate Resilience Annual Awards evaluation rubric encourages Tribes to incorporate traditional language (<i>Tribal Climate Resilience RFP</i> , n.d.).
Misaligned expectations around trust-building	Challenges building relationships across distance and bureaucratic processes—a lack of dedicated attention to building trust as a stepping stone to collaboration. (Whyte 2020; p. 2). For example, many villages report rarely receiving visits from federal officials or staff.	Village leaders often cite exceptions. Frequently, these exceptions seem related to the presence of one or two specific agency staff who were viewed to be uncommonly helpful or invested in Tribal success (e.g., Pennington 2023; p. 236).
Challenges retaining institutional knowledge—in Tribal and federal settings	Small offices make Tribal communities vulnerable to turnover of both staff and elected leaders. Decade-scale projects (e.g., village relocation) are often unprepared to manage these changes proactively (Coleman et al. 2021). Community planning documents require frequent revisions. In federal agencies, staff turnover may also be high, and transfer of institutional knowledge and relationships between outgoing and incoming personnel is poor.	The BIA Tribal Climate Resilience Annual Awards evaluation rubric encourages Tribes to develop capacity and skills within the broader Tribal community (<i>Tribal Climate Resilience RFP</i> , n.d.).
Technical language impedes understanding and distorts results	Community members may feel sidelined by highly technical language in planning and grantmaking (Rivkin et al. 2013).	None known.
Limited capacity within federal government to pursue decolonial approaches that align with community priorities	The logic of cost-benefit analysis introduces systematic bias (e.g., by undervaluing subsistence resources Bradshaw 2019); agency staff are not adequately familiar with Indigenous contexts.	The US Department of Transportation PROTECT Grant Program provide for “economic analysis flexibility for Indian Tribes,” a small but notable step away from a singular assessment framework (US DOT 2023).
Lack of shared objectives	Many grant applications are scored based on rubrics with loose relationships to applicant merit. In feedback to one Tribal government’s rejected funding application, BIA mentioned that the application exceeded the page limit indicated on the grant instructions.	The US EPA Indian Environmental General Assistance Program provides a framework for EPA-Tribal Environmental Plans (ETEPs), which are intended to create alignment on shared environmental priorities between EPA and Tribal governments, including on “identification of mutual roles and responsibilities”. (US Environmental Protection Agency 2022).

Table 1 (continued)

Barrier	Example(s)	Notable exception(s)
Difficulties coordinating among various Tribal and federal entities	Most Alaska Native communities are required to coordinate between several governmental or quasi-governmental entities, including Tribal governments, Alaska Native corporations, and municipal (city) governments (US Government Accountability Office 2020). The Denali Commission was founded in an effort to address this complex coordinating task but has not succeeded, citing a lack of funding resources (US Government Accountability Office 2009).	Several communities in Norton Sound have bi- or trilateral working groups to coordinate among Tribal entities.
Physical and cultural distance	Many federal agencies' regional offices (e.g., BIA and EPA) that serve Alaska are based in the Lower 48, leading to a lack of Alaska-specific expertise and familiarity.	None known.

Table 2 Summary of certain non-micropolitical barriers to climate adaption in rural Alaska Native communities. An incomplete list

Barrier	Reference
Cost-matching requirements limit eligibility	(US Government Accountability Office 2003, 2009, 2022)
Lack of funding appropriated by Congress	(US Government Accountability Office 2009, 2020)
High cost of construction (and low uptake of low-cost alternatives)	(US Government Accountability Office 2009)
Poor coordination by federal agencies with overlapping responsibilities	(US Government Accountability Office 2009, 2022)
Policies that restrict pre-disaster hazard mitigation	(Bronen and Chapin 2013; US Government Accountability Office 2020)
Rigid eligibility guidelines and incompatibility with Alaska-specific Tribal organizations (specifically, Alaska Native Corporations).	(Pennington 2023)
State laws require hiring certified workers for many construction jobs, with the practical effect of requiring labor to be imported from elsewhere in the state at a higher cost.	

As Alaska Native communities struggle to overcome these micropolitical barriers, “capacity building” has emerged as a solution that positions Native communities as a broken element in an otherwise-functioning institutional meshwork. But this narrative risks overlooking the consequences of historical violence and oppression, and may imply that communities are responsible for their own success or failure as they apply to—rather than *demand*—assistance (Kashwan and Ribot 2021; Marino and Ribot 2012).

These issues impinge upon communities’ ability to make demands upon systems of power and to access resources; this is where the *politics* (relating to *power*) of micropolitics come into play. Micropolitics privileges certain communities and disenfranchises others in a way that has limited correspondence to need or merit.

In rural Alaska Native villages, community requests (and demands) for assistance are only admitted through a highly technical language and practice of bureaucracy that obfuscate the moral and legal responsibility the federal government has to assist Tribal commu-

nities. In this process, Tribes and their members are required to discipline themselves and become better colonial subjects in order to be considered for aid.

3.3 Discussion: improving domestic diplomacy

Public institutions do not interact as sovereign bodies in a frictionless medium. There are forces at play that operate at more mundane levels than policy itself. Governments are not things that can be separated from the complex world of human relationships; they are made up of people, computers, intermittent phone connections, hearing aids, and a whole host of human and more-than-human components (Abrams 1988). The actual practice of how governments—federal, Tribal, state, and regional—communicate with each other is “messy” (Law 2004). And messiness is not apolitical; it entrenches existing power structures. The neglect of micropolitics, which is one form of this messiness, leads to chronically poor relationships and ineffective communication between Alaska Native communities and their governments.

Unaddressed, micropolitics may prevent Indigenous communities from engaging on equal footing with the systems designed to serve them. This disparages their sovereignty. These relationships, in order to succeed, must be built on a foundation of mutual trust and understanding. Potawatomi scholar Kyle Whyte notes that “lessons from generations of colonialism about how to avert bad relationship-making have not been learned by the parties who should have learned them” (2020; p. 5). These institutional failures are not the responsibility of Tribes to address (e.g., through “capacity building” as a self-contained remedy); framing them as such inappropriately accepts a logic that makes colonized communities responsible for overcoming their own marginalization (Kashwan and Ribot 2021).

It would be wrong to identify these issues as simple matters of policy implementation. Rather, these phenomena are rooted in deep structures of colonialism and racism. The context of “natural” disasters often gives false cover to the violent origins of environmental vulnerability (Marino 2012; Marino et al. 2022). In the case of Alaska Native villages, their current precarity is not an issue of bad geographical luck; rather, it’s political all the way down.

The micropolitical issues identified in this paper are not universal across the US federal government. Many agencies, including the White House, have taken steps toward addressing these issues. For example, in 2022 the White House released “Guidance on Indigenous Knowledge,” encouraging federal agencies to integrate traditional and Indigenous knowledge practices, where appropriate, into their processes and protocols. These are encouraging signs of progress (Council on Environmental Quality 2022).

This final section elaborates upon three specific ways in which micropolitics impinges on Alaska Native self-determination in environmental adaptation, and outlines steps toward improving addressing these issues.

3.3.1 Technical planning requirements limit communities’ agency

Across the US’ bureaucratic funding landscape, technical planning is a prerequisite to receiving funding for environmental adaptation. Having a hazard mitigation plan, or a technical architecture for a community adaptation project, is often a necessary condition for major infrastructure projects. As a result, Alaska Native communities are required to

perform complex infrastructural planning tasks that consume time and resources and limit community agency by requiring third-party involvement.

A “capacity gap” (Minnes and Vodden 2017) emerges in the space between Alaska Native villages’ technical capacity and funders’ eligibility requirements. This leaves rural communities in a catch-22. In order to be eligible for funding, they must submit detailed and technical plans. But they require funding in order to create such plans; that level of capacity is rarely available within any small rural community, settler or Indigenous. On the wall of one Tribal government’s office building is a handwritten list of these plans, which the community has made in recent years. It numbers in the dozens, including a flood assessment, resilience plan, strategic plan, strategic management plan, risk assessment, and more. Expressed as a ratio, the village has roughly eight residents for each plan required by various agencies.

To fill this capacity gap, third parties are often hired by Alaska Native Tribes and their regional nonprofit organizations to translate village needs into the language of engineering and infrastructure planning. In one village, a phone call with EPA following Typhoon Merbok was joined by an Anchorage-based engineer. When technical questions arose about this particular community’s recovery efforts, the engineer was called upon to answer them. The community was required to trust that the engineer, who was not part of the village or even physically present at the meeting, appropriately represented their needs. When conversations about the delivery of adaptation services are primarily conducted in this technical language, community members are disenfranchised, limited in their ability to self-advocate and critique decisions that are made on their behalf or with their partial consent (Rivkin et al. 2013). Third-party (and usually profit) firms become the *de facto* representatives of communities, but their ability to communicate priorities may be limited by a lack of attention to cross-cultural issues and an inability to frame Tribal priorities in technical language.

3.3.1.1 Policy recommendations Initiate federal-Tribal collaborations prior to the technical planning stage. This is already required in many cases by federal law (Consultation and Coordination With Indian Tribal Governments 2020). Where possible, encourage the use of plain-English documents for community consultation. Reduce requirements for pre-award technical planning.

3.3.2 Poor relationship-building limits trust

“Consent, trust, accountability, and reciprocity are qualities of relationships that are critical for justice-oriented coordination across societal institutions on any urgent matter,” writes Whyte (2020; p. 2). A long history of colonial harm has created a baseline level of distrust between Alaska Native communities and non-Native government officials (Bradshaw 2019). Many Alaska Natives working in Tribal government share the familiar experience of speaking to government staff thousands of miles away and learning that the person on the other line has a limited conception of these communities’ geography, history, and values. As one village president told me: “They’re clueless.” On a phone call with one FEMA representative, a city mayor patiently explained several times to the confused official that his village did not have street names.

The community leaders of an Iñupiaq village in Northwest Alaska (outside of this study area) note that private-sector representatives (e.g., from oil companies) tend to approach their community with more grace and respect than representatives from state and federal government (Kaktovik, Alaska, [no date](#)). This may be related to funding, but is likely linked to private-sector representatives feeling a need to build trust and goodwill. Government staff, by contrast, may feel already empowered, and therefore unincentivized to build goodwill or disrupt their position as gatekeepers to funding and resources.

Following cultural norms, Alaska Native communities place an emphasis on building relationships over time and in person. Many communities express frustration at the perceived lack of in-person visits by agency staff (Jensen et al. [2022](#); Pennington [2023](#)). When visits do occur, they are often seen as too short. In interviews, exceptions to this general trend were spoken of warmly.

A resident of Shishmaref told an anthropologist, “let the federal agencies come here and experience a whole storm, not come for the day and leave... it always seems like they don’t believe us” (Marino [2012](#); p. 379). In the regional capital of Nome, law enforcement officers boast about successfully avoiding spending a night in Alaska Native villages by always taking the morning flight out and catching the evening flight back home. When one village received a multi-day visit from FEMA officials, eight months after Typhoon Merbok, the federal employees commuted each day from Nome on the local airline—a \$585 round-trip ticket—rather than arranging local accommodation, such as by staying in the designated guest bedrooms at the Tribal office, or in the apartment maintained by the school.

3.3.2.1 Policy recommendations Federal agency staff often neglect the simple but essential practices required to build trust over time. Visiting in person, prioritizing effective communication, while taking the time to learn about Tribal communities are essential steps to overcoming a history of hostile federal policies and laying a foundation for effective collaboration. Building trust is a critical step in effective collaboration. As such, it requires time and resources that are rarely allocated today, to the detriment of Tribal-federal relationships. Pennington ([2023](#)) urges the importance of hiring more dedicated Tribal liaisons at FEMA—the same is true for many other agencies that routinely coordinate with Alaska Native communities.

3.3.3 A lack of collaborative norms hinders progress

The funding landscape for climate adaptation projects in Alaska Native communities is competitive by design (US GAO, [2022](#)). Agencies often (but not always) assume the role of impartial referee. Their role is generally to judge the quality of funding applications rather than volunteer their help and expertise in partnership with vulnerable communities. In this configuration, Alaska Native communities and federal agencies suffer from a non-collaborative process (Bradshaw [2019](#)). A putatively meritocratic system often rewards the communities who best meet agencies’ stated requirements and scoring rubrics, rather than the communities who most in need of assistance. As a result, communities with greater access to certain resources generally produce more competitive applications.

Furthermore, many Alaska Native communities feel that competing with one another for scarce resources violates cultural norms (Jensen et al. [2022](#); Rock [2016](#)). One Tribal presi-

dent explained after Typhoon Merbok, “We’re related to everybody in [village A], [village B], and [village C]. All of our Tribes felt a tremendous sense of... *wow, we got really lucky*, while 24 of our family and extended families lost their homes altogether.” This sentiment is common across the Norton Sound region, where Tribal leaders fear that by applying for federal aid, they might be taking away from the neediest villages.

3.3.3.1 Policy recommendations Continue to develop joint federal-Tribal agendas (e.g., the EPA-Tribal Environmental Plan) that outline roles and responsibilities toward delivering on shared goals. Involve agency staff in the grant process as collaborators rather than referees. Prioritize *needs-based* assessment where feasible, to reduce the perception and reality of inter-Tribal competition.

3.4 Conclusion: environmental adaptation, trust, and sovereign futures

For Alaska Native villages — like many rural Indigenous communities — environmental adaptation is a multifaceted and more-than-infrastructure challenge. In many ways, it is inseparable from the broader effort to survive amid continued colonial pressures (Curley and Lister 2020; Whyte 2017). In this context, climate adaptation is not merely about coastal defense or erosion management; it is about creating livable futures that make space for Indigenous flourishing, self-determination, and prosperity, as defined by communities (Heise et al., 2017). These futures, in keeping with the Lakota axiom, *Mitákuye Oyás’iŋ* “All my relations,” (Black Elk 2016), extend far beyond the boundaries of most agency handbooks.

Generally speaking, micropolitical issues between Alaska Native communities and federal agencies arise because limited consideration is given to the historical and political contexts that led to the present conditions of environmental, social, and political precarity (Kashwan and Ribot 2021). These problems may be ameliorated with the introduction of new systems, such as government-funded technical planning centers, that can help bridge the capacity gap. But a commitment to Indigenous self-determination requires ensuring that programs themselves are designed to meet Alaska Native communities where they are, which in turn requires a shift from administering aid programs to *rendering assistance* and solving problems based on collaborative norms. When Alaska Native Tribal governments are perceived to fall short of what is asked or expected, settler governments need to ask themselves: *what did we get wrong?* rather than looking to Alaska Native communities to explain shortcomings.

Sociologists have long warned against the temptation to represent the state as something separate from a collection of people and technology (Abrams 1988). Governments do not communicate with each other; people do. In the case of Tribal and federal governments in Alaska, government representatives speak, email, text, fax, post on social media, and submit complicated online forms. The nation-to-nation relationship is ultimately person-to-person. The nation-to-nation relationship between the United States and foreign countries is conducted through the intimate human rituals of state dinners, gift exchanges, ambassadorships, and telephone calls. By contrast, the “domestic diplomacy” between Alaska Native Tribal governments and federal agencies could hardly be more different. The face-to-face connections that engender trust and mutual understanding are widely heralded as exceptions, rather

than the rule. In interviews, Tribal leaders are quick to note the difficulty of explaining the dynamics of Alaska Native rural communities, such as the importance of subsistence, to outsiders.

It is not beyond the capacity of the federal government to create long-lasting relationships based on trust and shared objectives; it is routinely done with other sovereign governments. But building these relationships requires prioritizing a form of domestic diplomacy that continues to be neglected even at a time of renewed commitment to American Indian and Alaska Native communities. In rural Alaska, this requires building interpersonal connections, operating with reasonable expectations of Tribal bureaucratic capacity, rendering assistance in a collaborative manner, and meeting Alaska Native communities in an earnestly diplomatic fashion, by traveling some distance—politically, culturally, and geographically—to find a shared space where two very different governments can collaborate successfully. Researchers, advocates, policymakers, and career government officials must attend to these micropolitical forces in order to close the persistent gaps between ambition and outcome.

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