

Improving Public Participation in Greenland Extractive Industries¹

*Anne Merrild Hansen & Rachael Lorna Johnstone**

This contribution is based on a seminar and workshop on public participation processes related to extractive industries in the Arctic, organized by the Arctic Oil and Gas Research Centre at Ilisimatusarfik (University of Greenland) on October 17th and 18th 2017. The seminar was led by experts on extractive industries, indigenous peoples, impact assessments, law, and public participation. They came from Greenland, Denmark, Iceland, Norway, Russia, Scotland, England and Brazil. The seminar was open to the public and was well attended by representatives from the ministries, municipal governments, academic and research institutes, NGOs and others. A select group of invited experts and a group of graduate students from Ilisimatusarfik took part in the workshop.

Legal requirements for public participation in the licensing processes

Public participation in relation to development of extractive industries in Greenland is governed through the Mineral Resources Act and the related impact assessment regulations. The present impact assessment system was implemented during the past ten years and is therefore still relatively young, but as some extractive projects have already been implemented and several more proposed, the management regime has had to mature fast. The impact assessment system follows international standards and public participation is an inherent component in the processes of both social and environmental impact assessments. Extractive companies applying for licenses must conduct impact assessments as part of their licence applications. For mining, this is only required when the applicant seeks a production licence. However assessments are required prior to some exploration activities for hydrocarbons (such as seismic testing) if they could cause significant impacts and always in advance of exploratory drilling or production. Social impact assessments are also required before exploratory drilling and hydrocarbon production. An overview of the general development

¹ The text of this contribution is based on a Briefing Note on the same topic, published on the Arctic Oil and Gas Research Centre website, which summarizes the key lessons identified on how to improve public participation processes in Greenland.

* Directors, Arctic Oil and Gas Research Centre

steps for an extractive project can be seen below.

for permissions to mine or conduct exploratory drilling, then there is a risk that people will not take part in public participation processes or will not be able to do so effectively. A lack of information during the early stages of

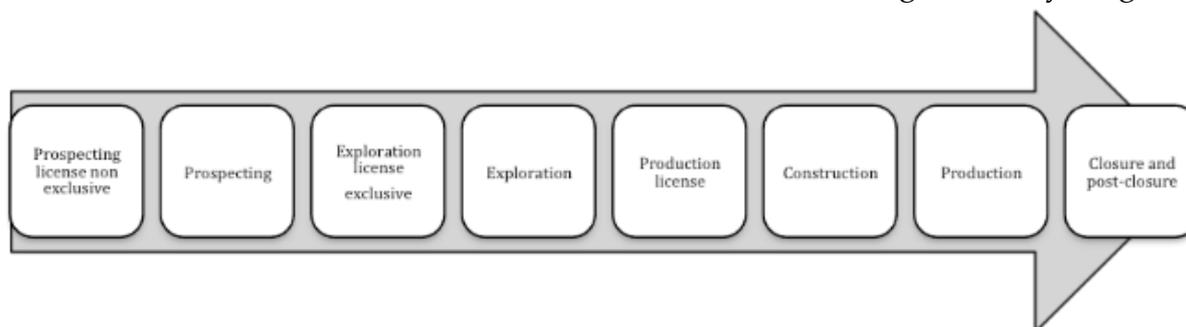


Figure 1. Overview of lifecycle of an extractive project (Source, Hansen et al. 2016)²

Early preparation of locals and capacity building

Knowledge exchange during public participation processes is essential for locals to be able to adapt to and benefit from extractive projects. Knowledge exchange is needed, for example, to facilitate transparency and secure that local knowledge and concerns are taken into consideration in decision-making processes and project development.

The premise for knowledge exchange is dialogue between the involved parties. Capacity for people to enter a dialogue on a topic requires an initial understanding of the subject. If information is not provided *in advance* of public meetings when companies apply

development can also create mistrust from the public towards regulatory authorities and companies. As one stated during the seminar: *“We want to be the first to know if something is happening in our area”*. If people are not provided access to objective and balanced information early in the process, then experiences show that they will seek information from alternative sources, most often the internet. It can be difficult to filter information and identify reliable sources on the internet and this can in the end cause confusion and frustration and disturb the dialogue. As one stated at the workshop: *“It is not only about having the right to participate it is also about using that right. But using that right requires capacity to do so. We need to build knowledge and interest to be able to learn and consume information.”* If people don't have basic information in advance, the “consultation” meeting is in fact a one-way “information” meeting – the

² <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.exis.2015.11.013>

companies and authorities “tell people” about their plans – often for the first time – so there is no time to digest the information and respond. The Arctic Oil and Gas Research Centre therefore proposes that initiatives are taken by actors such as authorities, research institutions, educational institutions and the media to inform and engage the public about extractive projects before or during early exploration. Meetings could be scheduled in East, North, South and mid-Greenland every second or third year during which governmental representatives and independent experts explain projects in development, with an emphasis on local projects. These meetings would be quite distinct from the project specific impact assessment consultations.

Proposal 1: That initiatives are taken by actors such as authorities, research institutions, educational institutions and the media, to inform and engage the public about extractive projects before or during early exploration.

Sharing grassroots expertise

Another way of building capacity discussed at the workshop is development of community guidelines on how locals can themselves prepare for development and engage proactively in decision-making and impact

assessment processes. Such guidelines, it was stressed, cannot be designed solely by academic experts but should draw from experiences of people from other areas in the Arctic who have lived through extractive projects. Such grassroots experts can share first-hand accounts of how extractive projects have affected their settlements, how they have balanced interests between different groups, and what they might do differently if facing a new development project. Such grassroots experts have the advantage of being able to talk authoritatively about social impacts in ordinary language and would also likely be perceived as untainted by bias. Grassroots experts could complement the scientific experts and provide another perspective on what developments mean for local communities.

The Arctic Oil and Gas research Centre proposes that during the consultation phases in impact assessment processes, people are given the opportunity to meet with or hear from people from other communities where exploration and/or production of minerals or hydrocarbons have taken place from other parts of Greenland. They speak Greenlandic and as it was stressed: “Who are better to talk about what to expect and what to talk about and foresee?”

Proposal 2: That during the consultation phases in impact assessment processes, people are given the opportunity to meet with or hear from people from other communities where exploration and/or production of minerals or hydrocarbons have taken place.

Safe fora for open dialogue

Another issue stressed during the workshop discussion is the need for public participation and debate to take place in fora where people feel that sharing is safe: both in relation to feeling free to express critical opinions toward the projects and in opposing the opinions of other locals. Some participants expressed concerns about their fear of bullying or exclusion from social networks if they spoke up against a popular view or a view held by people they regarded as powerful. People also need to be confident that their input is not misused, for example, used to legitimise projects they do not support. Safe fora also mean that public participation should take place in an atmosphere where people feel comfortable to talk about issues that may be sensitive to them. As one workshop participant stated, “We need a safe space to debate, to feel comfortable”. Larger fora and public meetings do not always motivate people to share their thoughts.

The Arctic Oil and Gas Research centre proposes that public participation fora be redesigned in a manner that makes people feel safe and for information shared to be treated with a degree of sensitivity: in some cases confidentiality or anonymously as necessary.

Proposal 3: That companies and authorities consider how to accept and consider confidential information and to facilitate anonymous submission of views.

The number of people in a room during meetings also influences willingness to enter a dialogue or share thoughts: we recommend that companies and authorities hold smaller, targeted meetings to ensure both a safe space and to encourage people to speak up.

Proposal 4: That companies and authorities consider how to hold smaller, targeted meetings to ensure both a safe space and to encourage people to speak up.

Learning from former and present projects in Greenland

During the workshop, different issues came up which pointed towards the

need for more research in, about, and for Greenland. It was pointed out that there is a lack of systematic evaluations of the former and present extractive projects. In order to understand how further to improve public participation, lessons may be learned from former extractive projects (also from the projects that never made it to the production) in Greenland. For example in order to ensure that the majority participates, it is necessary to know first of all who is participating now and, even more importantly, which groups are not participating.

The Arctic Oil and Gas research Centre proposes that an evaluation is carried out to inform project management. This could include investigations of what the public participation processes have focused on, how they were carried out and what they lead to in practice. It could also examine social impacts, especially unexpected impacts, and community responses to changes. The evaluation could be made in collaboration between university researchers, government officials and companies to jointly decide on the scope and methods and work together on data interpretation and analysis.

Proposal 5: That initiatives are taken to evaluate former extractive projects in Greenland and consider what lessons can be applied for future management.

