

Sustainable Development and the Arctic

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Although there has been extensive research in the field of sustainability, sustainable development in the Arctic remains one of the understudied subjects. As a worrisome factor, environmental change has become evident in recent assessments of ocean acidification, increasing water temperatures, sea ice retreat, melting glaciers, changes both in fauna and flora, and thawing permafrost. In some regions, fisheries policy also presents governance challenges due to the legal treaty regime. It is also worth noting that the frequent use of sustainability creates a paradox as the Arctic's economic potential involves the exploration and exploitation of the Arctic's unique natural resources.

On the other hand, plentiful research has been committed to suggest enhancements for the Arctic governance arrangements in consideration of the challenges affecting the region adversely. Intending to pursue that goal, international legal research often focuses on examining governance frameworks of regions similar to the Arctic and investigating their applicability within the territory. Since the management of non-renewable natural resources necessitates a strengthened legal framework to balance environmental protection and development of Arctic communities and sustainable development in the Arctic is closely related to resource exploitation, there is an obvious need for inter-, multi- and trans-disciplinary studies as well as a comprehensive framework for implementation strategies to respond to pervasive challenges. Accordingly, a broad diversity of governance matters including Arctic policies, sustainable development, international law, indigenous rights, the science-policy interface as well as Arctic regional cooperation have taken remarkable attention in recent years.

While the Arctic states have reacted to the emerging non-Arctic actors by gradually reinforcing the Arctic Council through the implementation of legally binding instruments, the non-Arctic states proceed to publish research-oriented Arctic policies in which their presence has mainly been legitimized by the global effects of human-induced climate change. However, unlike Antarctica, sovereignty and sovereign rights related to marine areas have an

indispensable role in Arctic governance. The sovereignty of all the land area firmly belongs to the Arctic states while their exclusive maritime jurisdiction covers much of the Arctic waters. Due to its highly complex governance framework – international, national, and regional levels as well as the EU – the Arctic-wide cooperation process has been settled on a soft law-based trend that focuses on promoting non-legally binding guidelines, best practices, and recommendations.

On the other hand, based upon three pillars, sustainable development entails a threefold process similar to sustainability. In order to implement sustainable development, the first step is to ensure a political system which encourages active participation in decision-making processes. The other step can be explained as developing an economic system which generates sustained surpluses while the last step includes building a social system which delivers solutions to tensions resulting from disharmonious development. The long-termed process also acknowledges human rights based on balanced life conditions in terms of economic, environmental, and social norms.

Sustainable development in the Arctic also encompasses Arctic communities and their economic and social conditions. In this process, the Arctic Council implements a similar but simplified version of sustainable development. The Arctic Environmental Protection Strategy (AEPS) particularly determined six environmental problems with high priority; radioactivity, persistent organic contaminants, acidification, heavy metals, oil pollution, and noise. International environmental protection treaties and necessary actions to address these threats were also outlined. Notably, six working groups were developed under the auspices of the Arctic Council: *Conservation of Arctic Flora and Fauna (CAFF)*, *Protection of the Arctic Marine Environment (PAME)*, *Emergency Prevention, Preparedness and Response (EPPR)*, *Arctic Monitoring and Assessment Programme (AMAP)*, *Sustainable Development Working Group (SDWG)* and *Arctic Contaminants Action Program (ACAP)*.

Accordingly, environmental impact assessments as well as the limitations of the Arctic Council have initiated further debates regarding the sustainable development of the region. As a consequence, there has been a heightened focus on Arctic governance based upon climate change-driven challenges, especially in the areas of fisheries, Arctic maritime navigation, and oil spills.

Furthermore, there is still limited knowledge about non-indigenous dwellers in the Arctic. While the vast majority of sustainability research investigates indigenous communities and societies, more knowledge is needed especially where the non-indigenous and transient population is relatively high.

Establishing the SDWG in 1998 and adopting the sustainable development goals of the United Nations (UN) in 2017 can be seen as the prominent steps by the Council. Besides, developing major projects such as *Arctic Food Innovation Cluster* and *Blue Economy* has advanced sustainable development while enhancing the economic, environmental, and social conditions of Arctic communities. Currently, there are several projects focused on societies & cultures, businesses & economies, health & well-being, as well as enabling infrastructure. The Working Group further plans to implement *the Nexus between Water, Energy, and Food* Project in which it is aimed to achieve sustainable management of water, provide access to sustainable and affordable energy, end hunger, and ensure food security. These goals are also closely interconnected to the UN's sustainable development goals. Besides, the Council plans to promote inclusive collaboration between other Working Groups, Indigenous Permanent Organizations, as well as academic institutions to ensure an efficient sustainable development process across the Arctic.

In near future, due to the accelerated effects of climate change, emerging economic activities particularly based on transportation is expected be expanded in the region. Therefore, developing the Polar Code is another milestone to mitigate shipping-related risks navigating through emerging Arctic Sea Routes. Since achieving environmental sustainability while fulfilling the sustainable development goals necessitates a multi-lateral approach and governance, Arctic states and the Council collaborate with several actors including the non-Arctic states as well. For instance, the UN-Habitat plans to implement a major project to enhance the adaptive capacity of the Arctic cities. Concordantly, a new and many-sided Arctic governance framework has emerged in which institutions, individuals, agencies, and organizations are inclusively connected at multiple organizational levels.

For more on this, read...

Kristoffersen B and O Langhelle, 'Sustainable Development as a Global-Arctic Matter: Imaginaries and Controversies' in: K Keilz and S Knecht (eds), *Governing Arctic Change*. Palgrave Macmillan (Palgrave Macmillan 2017) https://doi.org/10.1057/978-1-137-50884-3_2

