

Commentary

From Inspiration to Action, from Action to Institution: Some Early Interventions of Arctic Collaboration in Sustainable Development

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The need to enhance environmental impact assessment in the Arctic is today more topical than ever before due to manifold plans, strategies and activities for exploitation that have intensively been developed. Rapidly evolving technologies and the warming of the climate raise new opportunities to use Arctic natural resources, maritime and land areas. The Arctic Council's role to facilitate circumpolar collaboration for ensuring that the ongoing and future development in the Arctic will take place in a sustainable manner is key. Here, an Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) process that is targeted to the Arctic context plays an important role.

This is not, however, the first time that the need for collaboration on environmental impact assessment has been on the Arctic agenda. Let's look back some twenty-five years ago. We lived in a time when the Soviet Union was in its last years and Mikhail Gorbachev was preparing for his presidency of the Union. In his speech in Murmansk (September 1987) Gorbachev raised the issue that environmental issues are something that all Arctic countries share and that putting efforts together would be beneficial to all. This was a smart step to open difficult political discussions in the circumpolar north with a neutral theme that everyone shared and required collaborative actions to solve.

But at that time, the Soviet Union also had big internal issues to manage before serious action could be taken on environmental issues. Conversely, Finland took the idea forward, and in 1989 the eight Arctic countries joined efforts to protect the Arctic environment. The planning was finalized in 1991, when the Arctic Environmental Protection Strategy (AEPS) was signed by Ministers of all the Arctic countries.

The AEPS was structured around five programs: Sustainable Development and Utilization (SDU), Arctic Monitoring and Assessment Program (AMAP), the Conservation of Arctic Fauna and Flora (CAFF), Emergency Preparedness and Response (EPPR), and Protection of the Arctic Marine Environment (PAME). The AMAP evolved to an extensive and coherent program while others became umbrellas under which several activities took place. SDU was of this kind and here the development of the guidelines for an Arctic EIA took place.

The initiative was launched by Finland's Minister of the Environment Sirpa Pietikäinen in 1994 and after some intensive negotiations and a workshop later that year, the idea was accepted and the work started in 1995. This was followed by an intensive process which included identification of issues specific for carrying out an EIA in the Arctic, desk studies of EIA guidelines and other protocols in the various Arctic countries and beyond, as well as face to face negotiations and drafting in the form of workshops with EIA experts from all parties of the AEPS. The ongoing work was regularly reported to the political process of the AEPS for approval to ensure its continuation. After acceptance of the "Guidelines for Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) in the Arctic" at the Senior Arctic Officials' level, they were finally presented to the Arctic Environment Ministers in 1997. In their declaration in Alta, Norway, the Ministers noted their appreciation in receiving the guidelines and agreed that they should be applied. At this moment, the Arctic Council had been materialized in 1996 (i.e. Ottawa Declaration) and had taken the AEPS to be part of its work – including the guidelines of Arctic EIA.

The Arctic cooperation in the form of the AEPS has been raised as one of the success stories of international environmental collaboration. Its success refers to certain key requirements. Firstly, there was a clear need to build trust between the circumpolar states in a cold war and post-cold war context. Environmental issues are common to all Arctic states and politically neutral (i.e. their character did not stop at national borders). Thus the environmental problem became a common issue for all parties involved in circumpolar affairs.

This was linked to the second element. With the United Nations, countries and regions were globally preparing for the Rio Process, including the Biodiversity Strategy. The process of AEPS was most likely influenced by the Rio process, not the least due to the fact that not only the countries, but in many cases also the experts and civil servants were similar in both processes. Both Rio and AEPS brought indigenous peoples' groups to the process. In the case of AEPS, it brought them to the table with the Ministers.

Thirdly, the momentum was influenced by a shared intuition of the importance and success of the AEPS in internal assemblies of high officials and Ministers when the AEPS was being discussed and planned. At this point, there was already enough knowledge to convince the Ministers of the upcoming challenges which led to a flow of understanding the need to act. Environmentally disastrous accidents, such as the Exxon Valdez oil spill in Alaska, boosted the discussions of the need to combat jointly environmental challenges in the Arctic.

Fourthly and finally, the intentional nature of the AEPS process, and as a so-called soft-law mechanism, has been seen as one of the elements behind its success. Legally binding agreements have been seen as burdensome processes to develop and implement. In addition, violations of such agreements are dealt with on a legal level, while in non-voluntary agreements offenses are dealt with at the political level, seen as a signal of the country's weak commitment to the issue in question.

Twenty years have now passed since the *Guidelines for Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) in the Arctic* were introduced. At the beginning, the use of the guidelines was boosted in several ways. It was made a living document with a web based platform, the ARIA (Arctic Environmental Impact Assessment) which collected Arctic EIAs from the entire circumpolar region, to serve as examples in other parts of the Arctic. It was also tested in area-based training sessions such as those in northwestern Russia. And it was a topic touched upon by the UArctic. Progressively, the guidelines got diluted, and the small booklet was shelved, and its content lost in the web.

Today, there is a need to place the Arctic EIA once again on the agenda. The regulatory frameworks, the practices, the ways to communicate, the institutions, and most importantly, the activities that need to be assessed, are taking new forms. The Arctic EIA therefore has regained its relevance for the Arctic states. The political agenda in the world is again in a shifting situation where Russia is playing a specific role.

Maybe it is time to rethink the words of Gorbachev in 1987 and see, if the circumpolar environmental agenda has once again something to contribute to the otherwise difficult political negotiations between the circumpolar nations.

References

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