

# Co-creating Arctic Futures: Perspectives from Emerging Leaders on Youth Leadership and Inclusive Governance

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*As the Arctic undergoes unprecedented environmental and climate transformations, an urgent call for inclusive governance and intergenerational leadership echoes across the circumpolar region. In January 2024, 29 Emerging Leaders from the Circumpolar Arctic and Subarctic gathered in Northern Norway ahead of the 2024 Arctic Frontiers Conference. This diverse group, with global identities and multi-disciplinary backgrounds spanning science, policy, business, geopolitics, and law, brought together experiences that inspired this paper. We highlight the unique perspectives offered by younger generations and leaders to advocate for changes across a spectrum of critical Arctic issues. Our voices must be present in the decision-making which shapes our future, yet we observe some politicians, diplomats, legal, and business officials engaging in protracted discourse overlooking the urgent realities faced by those most directly impacted.*

*We address the concept of “youthwashing” and offer a critique, as well as actionable recommendations, for fostering inclusive decision-making. We explore the role of youth leadership in Arctic governance across various disciplines and how diverse perspectives are required to better shape Arctic futures. Our concerns encompass the sustainable management of the Arctic’s natural resources, respect and protection of Indigenous rights and Traditional Knowledge, and developing solutions rooted in sustainability, survivance, and justice. As Emerging Leaders, we aspire to create liveable futures for generations to come, challenging the present trajectory set by current senior leadership. In turn, we ensure that while the Arctic is undergoing significant change, it develops in a framework respectful of all generations, ultimately rooted in justice for all Arctic peoples.*

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## Introduction

The Arctic is experiencing some of the most rapid environmental changes on the planet (AMAP, 2022). These transformations have direct implications for the lives and livelihoods of the Peoples who have called the Arctic home for thousands of years. These changes also impact the global climate system and the livelihoods of communities well beyond the Arctic's boundaries (Vincent, 2019). Given the significant and swift environmental shifts occurring in the Arctic, there is an urgent need for innovative governance approaches that are both inclusive and forward-thinking. Incorporating intergenerational leadership is essential to ensure that the voices of those living in the Arctic, particularly younger generations, are meaningfully included in policy discussions and decision-making processes. While the lives and futures of young people are often topics of discussion, their actual inclusion in decision-making spaces tends to remain superficial (Carabelli & Lyon, 2016; Macauley et al., 2022).

In January 2024, a diverse group of 29 Emerging Leaders from the Circumpolar Arctic and Subarctic, all working on Arctic and pole-related issues, convened in Northern Norway ahead of the Arctic Frontiers conference (Arctic Frontiers, 2024). This group, composed of individuals with multidisciplinary expertise in science, policy, business, geopolitics, and law, inspired the development of this article. The aim of this article is to highlight the unique perspectives and contributions of younger generations to Arctic governance. The insights and leadership of these younger generations are crucial for fostering just and sustainable solutions to the critical issues affecting the Arctic, both for the current population and for future generations. We believe that the accelerating impact of climate change emphasises the urgent need for inclusive decision-making processes that reflect the needs and aspirations of younger generations, who serve as a more accurate conduit for the voices of future generations than today's senior leadership.



*Figure 1. Sharing our expertises and learning from our peers was at the heart of the Emerging Leaders Programme. Credits: Alexandru Mitu, all rights reserved.*

## Addressing critical Arctic issues

The Arctic is a region of complex challenges, where environmental, economic, and geopolitical interests converge. It is currently facing a myriad of critical issues that demand immediate attention and innovative solutions. While our paper does not aim to provide an exhaustive account of all the challenges and opportunities facing the Arctic, it focuses on some of the most pressing concerns. By emphasising these concerns, the necessity for immediate and collaborative action becomes evident as it is essential to mitigate and prevent further environmental degradation, while at the same time ensuring the resilience of the natural world and humanity's existence and prosperity within it.

The Arctic and sub-Arctic hold some of the world's major commercial fishery grounds, including pollock, cod, herring, halibut, and salmon (Fauchald et al., 2021; Gritsenko, 2018; Norris & McKinley, 2017). These species tend to be more vulnerable to climate change and anthropogenic activities because of their long lifespans and delayed sexual maturity (Norris & McKinley, 2017). As Arctic waters continue to warm, many of these commercially important species are migrating further north into the Arctic (Dubay, 2021; Fauchald et al., 2021; Jørgensen et al., 2020; Norris & McKinley, 2017). The combination of this northward shift and the remote nature of these waters makes illegal, unregulated, and unreported fishing a large concern for the sustainability of these stocks. Various international agreements aim to define a state's right to fish, manage stocks, and prevent unregulated fishing, such as the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), the UN Fish Stocks Agreement (UNFSA), and the Central Arctic Ocean Fisheries Agreement (CAOFA) (Dubay, 2021; Fauchald et al., 2021; Norris & McKinley, 2017). The Central Arctic Ocean Fisheries Agreement (2018) specifically outlines a 16-year moratorium on commercial fishing in the Central Arctic Ocean to allow scientists time to study the ecosystem (Dubay, 2021). However, the effectiveness of these agreements is limited as they only apply to signees and not all states with fishing fleets are signatories, thereby making enforcement challenging (Dubay, 2021). Without appropriate regulations in place, many of the commercial stocks in the Arctic region could be at risk of collapse from overfishing, as commercial fisheries are driven by economic profit (Norris & McKinley, 2017).

Additionally, the Arctic has a long history of fossil fuel extraction, which developed into a large commercial-scale industry as many countries began using hydrocarbons and coal as energy sources in the 19th century (Gritsenko, 2018; Sörlin, 2021). Commercial interest in oil and gas in the Arctic intensified following the oil crises of the 1970s, leading to significant discoveries of stores in the Norwegian and Russian Arctic waters (Gritsenko, 2018; Morgunova, 2020). Geopolitical instability remains a powerful driver for oil and gas exploration in the Arctic, as nations cope with the need to ensure energy security (Morgunova, 2020). Today, the Arctic provides about 10% of the world's commercial oil, and 25% of its commercial natural gas (WWF Global Arctic Programme, n.d.). Russia, Norway, and the United States of America currently produce oil and gas in the Arctic, with Norway, notably, acting as the world's 3<sup>rd</sup> largest supplier of natural gas and providing 25% of the European Union (EU)'s demand (Morgunova, 2020). Canada announced a ban on issuing new offshore oil and gas licences in Canadian Arctic waters in 2016, and in 2019, it prohibited all oil and gas work in these waters due to environmental considerations (Zhang et al., 2024).

Beyond oil and gas, mining has also proven to be a prevalent extractive practice in the Arctic. Recently, it has been touted as pivotal for the transition from fossil fuels to “green” and “clean”

technologies (Henriques & Böhm, 2022). Even though mining in the Arctic was believed to be primarily post-contact, it can actually be traced back to before the arrival of Europeans and ensuing colonies with Indigenous communities mining copper prior to contact (Cooper et al., 2020). Arctic mining encompasses both traditional resources (e.g., copper, lead, iron, manganese, silver, uranium, and coal), precious minerals (e.g., diamonds and gold), and critical minerals (e.g., cobalt, cryolite, graphite, nickel, palladium, and platinum) (Bjørst, 2017; Cassotta & Goodsite, 2024; Gritsenko, 2018; Mazurier et al., 2020; Sörlin, 2021). Many of these minerals are essential for the production of batteries, smartphones, wind turbines, and electric cars (Henriques & Böhm, 2022). In particular, one of the most contentious mining projects can be found in Greenland.

Greenland was a Danish colony from 1721 until the Greenland Self-Government Act of 2009 (Bjørst, 2017; Henriques & Böhm, 2022). Despite expanding autonomy through the Act, Greenland is still seeking ways to establish economic independence, namely through mining, whilst also bearing in mind the environmental impacts. Indigenous Greenlandic Inuit make up almost 90% of the country's population (Bianco, 2024). The Greenlandic Inuit have rights and obligations of self-government under the Self-Government Act, even though Greenland is still a part of Danish territory (Ackrén, 2019). Under the Self-Government Act, Greenlanders' right to self-determination is recognized. (Jakobsen & Larsen, 2024) The Greenland Inuit's collective and regional territorial rights in Greenland have paved the way for significant decision-making over mining exploration projects, and ultimate decision-making over mining project approvals in certain areas in the Greenlandic Arctic. There are two prevailing political views in Greenland: (1) the "mining friendly", who desire to establish an independent and sustainable economy for Greenland, and (2) the political view, which is fearful of the environmental impacts of increased CO<sub>2</sub> emissions and radioactive waste (Henriques & Böhm, 2022). The Kvanefjeld mining project in Greenland highlights the tension between the desires for economic development and environmental preservation. It is notably led by an Australian company and backed by Chinese investors and has one of the largest rare earth mineral deposits in the world (Henriques & Böhm, 2022).

Finally, deep-sea mining in Arctic waters has recently emerged as a critical issue. Mining in the seabed is recognised as being able to provide the mineral resources important for decarbonization and clean energy transition strategies (Cassotta & Goodsite, 2024; Henriques & Böhm, 2022). However, deep-sea mining faces uncertainties regarding its potentially catastrophic environmental impacts and ambiguous legal framework (Cassotta & Goodsite, 2024). In particular, there is uncertainty concerning the intersection of governance over the Area (i.e. the seabed beyond the national continental shelf), within which a significant amount of deep-sea mining would take place, and the new Agreement under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) on the Conservation and Sustainable Use of Marine Biological Diversity of Areas beyond National Jurisdiction (United Nations, 2023). This uncertainty exists given the intersection of governance over waters beyond national jurisdiction through the Biodiversity Beyond National Jurisdiction (BBNJ) Agreement (United Nations, 2023, Articles 2-3), and the governance over the Area by the International Seabed Authority (United Nations, 1982, Article 137). While the above environmental, legal, and ethical concerns persist with respect to deep sea mining, the race for critical and valuable minerals globally, and in particular in the Arctic, is already well underway. For example, in January of 2024, Norway approved deep-sea mining exploration with the intent to establish a commercial deep-sea mining industry throughout the Norwegian continental shelf – the first declaration of its kind in the Arctic region (Gilbert, 2024).

Given that the Arctic is one of the fastest-changing regions globally (Rantanen et al., 2022), the decisions made today with regard to these critical and uniquely Arctic issues will have a greater impact on the Peoples of the Arctic, not only in the present but also in the future. In this context, young generations today, as well as future generations of tomorrow, will have a shorter time than generations of the past to influence their own lives and well-being through high-level political, legal, and business decision-making. In order to address this urgent reality, it is now vital to integrate young people from the Arctic into knowledge co-production and executive, high-level decision-making processes, ensuring their perspectives are central to the region's governance.

Our Emerging Leaders cohort included individuals selected from diverse fields such as resource management industries, Arctic business, subsistence and industrial fishing, governance, emergency response, scientific research, and law. During the Emerging Leaders Programme, before joining the Arctic Frontiers Conference, we engaged in productive debates on current Arctic issues, such as urban development and governance of deep-sea resources. Building on the progress from Emerging Leaders, at the 2024 EU Arctic Forum Arctic Youth Dialogues event (European Commission, 2024), young people from across the Arctic proposed policy initiatives for youth-inclusive planning, economic incentives for nature protection and conservation, management of Arctic oceans, and climate adaptation in the Arctic. These contributions underscore that every critical Arctic issue today has the potential for youth-driven innovative solutions. Every Arctic issue, therefore, is also a critical youth issue that demands their active participation.

### **Youth involvement in Arctic decision-making**

In response to the growing interest in the Arctic (Heininen, 2012; Steinveg, 2021), numerous conferences such as the Arctic Encounter Symposium, Arctic Frontiers, Arctic Spirit, Arctic Congress, and the Arctic Circle Assembly have been established. These gatherings often emphasise emerging economic opportunities in the Arctic due to climate change, including the potential for increased extraction of critical minerals and oil and gas, as well as the opening of new maritime traffic routes (Stouwe, 2017). At the same time, various risks and threats related to climate change, geopolitics and outmigration associated with the Arctic region are also discussed.

However, in our experience, these conferences often shy away from addressing the fundamental causes of climate change, such as carbon emissions and environmental destruction tied to historical colonialism and imperialism (Mercer & Simpson, 2023; Greenpeace & Runnymede Trust, 2022). Furthermore, these discussions tend to omit critical examinations of the interplays between capitalism and sustainability transitions (Clark et al., 2022; Feola, 2020). Yet, there are smaller workshops and conferences that consider these issues. For instance, the Annual Meeting of the Native American & Indigenous Studies Association (NAISA) includes discussions on the protection of land rights, cultural identity, and the sustainability of Indigenous cultural landscapes as well as the role of Indigenous humanities in challenging colonial narratives (NAISA, 2024). Another recent example is the “Patterns of Environment-making” workshop held in July 2024 at UiT - The Arctic University of Tromsø, which explored the historical contributions of dominant society to the climate crisis and highlighted Indigenous responses and resistances to Western colonialism and capitalist systems, emphasising the importance of including Indigenous perspectives in environmental debates and policy-making (University of Tromsø, 2024). Nevertheless, such events usually exist outside of the big political conferences and attract less public attention. This avoidance, likely aimed at evading controversy or tensions among nation-

states and diverse political views, presents significant challenges. By sidestepping critical issues, the important impact these changes have on current youth and future generations is overlooked. The legacies of historic injustices are not consigned to the past, but are alive in the present, and shape our futures (Mercer, 2022).

Notably, there are existing initiatives aimed at facilitating youth inclusion. Programs like Arctic Frontiers Emerging Leaders and High North Dialogue Academy foster networks that facilitate future collaborations between motivated young people, while providing opportunities for mutual meaningful engagement and advancement. Other initiatives, events, and networks seek to engage Arctic Indigenous youth such as the Permanent Participants Youth Network of the Arctic Council and the Arctic Leaders' Youth Summit. More recent events include the 2023 launch of the EU project Youth Together for Arctic Futures and Tromsø's upcoming status as the first Arctic city to hold European Youth Capital status in 2026 (Edvardsen and Martinussen, 2023). Even though these efforts are crucial in ensuring that the voices of Arctic youth are heard and considered in the formulation of policies that will inevitably affect their lives and the sustainability of their environment, youth engagement often falls into tokenism - a symbolic inclusion which lacks meaningful participation in the decision-making process. For instance, while youth participation is ostensibly one of the central components of the Arctic Frontiers conference (Steinveg, 2023), programmes like Emerging Leaders and the Student Forum unfortunately remain marginally integrated into the main conference proceedings. Notably, during the 2024 Big Picture sessions - the most significant panel discussions which featured representatives from the Norwegian government and other authorities - youth participation was limited to pre-recorded videos, without providing a forum for active involvement with these representatives. This level of participation can be considered as mere formality rather than meaningful engagement of young people, exemplifying what we refer to as *youthwashing*.

Young people's awareness and action against tokenistic youth engagement initiatives long predate the term youthwashing; but it nonetheless serves as a useful shorthand for the issues explored in this paper. The term 'youthwashing' was likely coined by Eilidh Robb (2019) through blog posts and tweets for the United Kingdom Youth Climate Coalition (UKYCC). Initially associated with fossil fuel companies using young people to improve their public image by suggesting alignment with youth-led climate justice movements (Robb, 2019; Youthwashing, 2019), it has since evolved to describe any tokenistic youth involvement in climate industry and policy spaces. The anti-youthwashing movement, led by young activists and leaders frustrated with their treatment in the climate industry and policy spaces, is an international one, with youth activists from across the globe and Indigenous youth activists at its centre (see, for instance, Youth4Climate, 2021; Indigenous Climate Action, 2020).

Since 2021, discussions of youthwashing have greatly proliferated, especially regarding tokenistic youth involvement in Congress of Parties spaces (Frost, 2021). In these fora, the faces of youth are often used as symbols of progressivity and diversity; whereas in reality, the contributions and priorities of youth are often sidelined. Within the Arctic Council, for instance, only the Conservation of Arctic Flora and Fauna Working Group has an explicit youth involvement policy (CAFF, 2021). Yet, young people in the Arctic are as affected as any age group by issues of other Working Groups, such as Arctic contaminants and pollutants, and emergency preparedness and response. Arguably, given the expected intensification of climate change impacts, and rising

shipping activities, broader extractive industry operations, and more external presence in the Arctic that will follow, youth are likely to be more deeply affected by these intersecting issues throughout their lives than older generations. In this context, tokenistic involvement can to a greater extent harm the well-being and mental health of young activists and leaders (Young, 2021).

At the same time, young people in the Arctic are uniquely positioned to offer innovative solutions for sustainable development and resource management. As Naja-Theresia Høegh, EU Special Advisor on Youth to European Commissioner Urpilainen, states:

*‘Youth are key stakeholders in forming policies concerning the Arctic region, including climate change, Indigenous and local communities, research, security, sustainability, and much more.’*

(European Commission, 2024)

Building on these discussions, progress has been made in addressing youthwashing and moving towards non-tokenistic youth involvement in Arctic policy, planning, and research spaces. In the academic field, Northern Research Forum (2000-2015) and Calotte Academy (1991-ongoing) are good examples of scientific fora facilitating interdisciplinary dialogue between early-career researchers and senior experts (Heininen, 2023; Calotte Academy, n.d.). Importantly, youth inclusion in these spaces is not meant to displace other voices, but to enhance decision-making by incorporating a broader range of perspectives, including those of younger generations. In the political sphere, organisations and programmes such as the Arctic Youth Network (AYN) and the Barents Regional Youth Council (BRYC) exist to foster youth leadership, engage them in northern politics, and facilitate collaboration across borders and cultures (Arctic Youth Network, n.d.). A youth-led and youth-focused organisation, AYN provides space for young people from across the Arctic to network, learn, and develop as leaders, and to engage directly with Arctic organisations to give young people a seat at the table. Through the AYN, youth voices have been amplified in organisations such as the University of the Arctic (UArctic), the Arctic Circle Assembly, and the Arctic Council Sustainable Development Working Group (AYN, n.d.). At the 2024 EU Arctic Forum and Indigenous Peoples’ Dialogue, groundbreaking youth panels organised by young Arctic leaders tackled issues related to youth participation in Arctic spaces and youthwashing head-on (European Commission, 2024). Many youth-centred initiatives provide financial support to cover participation costs, ensuring that individuals from diverse economic backgrounds have the opportunity to be included and benefit from these programs.

Nevertheless, youthwashing and tokenistic youth involvement remain salient issues in Arctic industry, policy, and research. Youth are increasingly organising to create their own networks, collaborate internationally, and ensure their voices are present. However, how effectively their voices are heard remains an issue. While young leaders should be acknowledged for their determination in self-organising, the issue of youthwashing remains a significant concern in Arctic youth spaces and must be addressed through both critical reflection and meaningful action. There is a compelling need to confront these issues head-on, challenging the polite expressions of uniformity that have perpetuated ongoing problems with a lack of inclusivity. By doing so, today’s young leaders aim to surpass past efforts and address the pressing issues that threaten the futures of all inhabitants, human and non-human, in the Arctic.

## Politics of the future

In decision-making, both the past and future are influential since individuals as well as collective actors participate, and ‘anticipate’ the future when deciding how to act in the present (Beckert 2016, Vervoort & Gupta 2018, Nanni et al., 2024). The future serves as a guiding beacon for action, and images of the future provide both direction and shape to societies and policies (Oomen et al., 2022). It is, therefore, important to keep in mind the ‘politics of the future’; specifically, ‘those social processes and practices that allow particular “imagined futures” to become socially performative’ (Oomen et al., 2022).

### *Future imaginaries*

In exploring the politics of the future, it is essential to understand the concept of future imaginaries. Future imaginaries can be defined as ‘collectively held, institutionally stabilised, and publicly performed visions of desirable futures’ (Jasanoff, 2015: 2). These imaginaries are not merely speculative; they are narratives that hold statements about expected or desired futures and possess a guiding nature. They direct actions in the present towards the expected or desired future (Oomen et al., 2022). Imaginaries extend beyond what exists or what is envisioned to exist; they form the cornerstone of framing the point on the horizon we strive to reach, driven by beliefs, emotions, and knowledge. If, for instance, these imaginaries depict the Arctic as a remote wilderness, it is this perception that will shape policies governing human conduct in the Arctic, regardless of the region’s actual circumstances (Ahlness, 2019). The importance of future imaginaries in decision-making highlights the need for active involvement from all social groups, including youth, to create inclusive imaginaries of the future that resonate with the entire population. Meaningful change is hindered without these inclusive imaginaries (Oomen et al., 2022).

Superficial involvement of youth in Arctic decision-making restricts their ability to influence the development of future imaginaries, reflecting the unequally distributed agency among people to shape and alter these imaginaries, and ultimately significantly impact outcomes (Oomen et al., 2022). The formulation of imaginaries for desirable futures must actively involve those who will inhabit these envisioned futures. Therefore, youth participation in present discussions must go beyond mere token gestures and youthwashing to safeguard the rights of current and future generations. The imaginaries we hold for the future directly influence the rights and well-being of those who will live in it. The narratives we craft and the policies we enact based on these future imaginaries not only shape our current actions but also determine the legacy we leave behind.

Ensuring that youth and other marginalised groups have a meaningful role in shaping these imaginaries is crucial, as their perspectives and interests are vital for creating equitable and sustainable futures. By actively involving diverse voices in the formulation of future imaginaries, we pave the way for policies that respect and protect the rights of those who will inherit the consequences of our decisions, particularly in the rapidly changing Arctic region.

### *The rights of future generations*

The question of what rights, if any, are owed, and by whom, to future generations is a topical subject in domestic and international legal circles. There are various lenses through which we can view the rights of future generations intersecting with the decisions we make today about the Arctic



through international actors such as states, corporations, civil society, and international government organisations.

Climate change is one of the primary concerns for the Arctic and intergenerational rights. The changes in the Arctic caused by climate change are, arguably for the first time, evident in a single generational time frame, if not shorter. The changes are complex, bringing both positive and negative impacts. Positively, climate change in the Arctic brings new economic opportunities, such as through new shipping routes, regional trade, and resource development (Stouwe 2017, 195; Dabiran-Zohoori, 2024). However, these opportunities are not inherently beneficial; without careful governance and the involvement of Indigenous Arctic communities, they could exacerbate existing issues. Improperly managed, they risk significant harm to human health and livelihoods (Dabiran-Zohoori, 2018). Ultimately, due to the global and systemic nature of Arctic climate feedbacks, the resulting costs may offset and potentially exceed the (economic) benefits in the long run (Alvarez et al., 2020).

Intergenerational rights refer to the concept that the present generation is obligated toward future generations in ensuring their needs and interests are protected. These rights are grounded in the idea that the actions and decisions made today can significantly and detrimentally affect the opportunities and quality of life of those in the future. This involves, for example, ensuring a safe living environment for future generations, but also mitigating climate change impacts and promoting adaptation strategies (Hiskes, 2017). Contrary to intergenerational welfare, intergenerational rights explore the obligations of present generations to future generations as a legal obligation.

Currently, there are several court cases around the world, both domestic and international, exploring the rights of future generations, as well as state obligations concerning climate change. Some examples include *Mathur v. His Majesty the King in Right of Ontario*, *Environnement Jeunesse* (Canada), *L’Affaire du Siècle* (France), *Demanda Generaciones Futuras* (Colombia), *The People’s Climate Case* (EU), *Pandey* (India), *Do-Hyun Kim et al* (Korea), and *Union of Swiss Senior Women for Climate Protection* (Switzerland) (Neumann, 2022, 28), among others. Further, the very first international treaty decision by the International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea explored the link between climate change obligations of states and UNCLOS, which found that greenhouse gas pollution is a form of marine pollution (International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea, 2024, para 173). There are other international climate change cases making their way through international courts and tribunals currently, including a notable request for an advisory opinion of the International Court of Justice regarding the obligations of States with respect to climate change (United Nations General Assembly, 2023).

These examples are only some of the many cases around the world which demand stronger climate protection policies, public and private liability for environmental damages, and a more proactive political approach to climate change and sustainability. A key component of a number of these cases is the question of state obligations with respect to younger and future generations (*Mathur v. His Majesty the King in Right of Ontario*, 2023; United Nations General Assembly, 2023). What is common and true with respect to these cases is that international and domestic courts are increasingly becoming aware of the existence of potential procedural and substantive rights of future generations, owed by States, in the context of climate change (*Mathur v. His Majesty the King in Right of Ontario*, 2023; United Nations General Assembly, 2023).

Arctic peoples and states hold a significant legal and political opportunity in clarifying what obligations and rights states hold with respect to future generations in the context of climate change due to the unique confluence of scientific, jurisdictional, and rapid environmental change experienced by Arctic peoples. Even though future generations do not yet exist, Arctic states are reliant on their presence to continue their assertions of sovereignty in the Arctic. Claims of territory in more remote areas of the Arctic are dependent on historical use and custom (Dabiran-Zohoory, 2024). Therefore, Arctic states have a strong legal and geopolitical interest in maintaining a true link between historical practices and future practices in the Arctic by fostering the voices of both younger and future generations in senior-level decision-making. The interests of the sovereign territory of Arctic states are dependent on taking on this active role, ahead of the incoming decisions by international and domestic courts on the specific content of the rights of future generations.

In conclusion, the politics of the future is crucial for shaping commercial, social, environmental, and legal landscapes today, particularly in the Arctic. Future imaginaries influence present-day policies and actions, underscoring the need for inclusive and representative involvement when drafting these imaginaries from all social groups, especially the youth. By empowering young people and marginalised groups to meaningfully contribute to the shaping of these imaginaries, we not only create more equitable and sustainable futures but also uphold our ethical responsibilities to those who will inherit the outcomes of today's decisions. Especially in the Arctic, the urgency of intergenerational justice is most profound. As we move forward, it is imperative that our policies and actions reflect a commitment to these principles, beyond the minimum legal obligations, ensuring that the voices of all generations are heard and respected in the crafting of our shared future.



Figure 2. *Working together for our futures.* Credits: Alexandru Mitu, all rights reserved.

## Youth leadership and aspiring for livable futures

Youth leadership is crucial for advocating for the rights of future generations and steering the Arctic towards sustainable and inclusive futures. As Emerging Leaders 2024 of Arctic Frontiers, representing diverse disciplines and regions, we recognise the unique contributions of Arctic youth

leadership in shaping livable futures and have identified shared characteristics of Arctic youth leadership.

In the dynamic context of Arctic research and operations, the perspectives of young leaders reveal both commonalities and contextual peculiarities that shape their influence in their respective fields. Across disciplines, there is a shared recognition among Emerging Leaders of the vital contributions younger professionals can make, particularly in leveraging digital tools for grassroots advocacy and challenging traditional paradigms with innovative solutions. This is particularly evident in climate change adaptation and academia, where youth employ new methods, such as ‘ClimateCafés,’ to foster interdisciplinary knowledge exchange and develop context-specific solutions (Boogaard & De Jong, 2020). From an Arctic Indigenous perspective, young Indigenous leaders significantly highlight the inequities faced by Arctic Indigenous Peoples, emphasising the importance of equitable climate change discourse.

Despite these strengths, young leaders face contextual challenges unique to their fields. In Arctic maritime operations, for example, they must manage teams with older, more experienced members, requiring adaptability and strategic thinking. In climate research, the gap between grassroots advocacy and policy influence remains a barrier to meaningful engagement with established governmental structures. Furthermore, academia’s hierarchical nature also limits the impact of young experts, even as they contribute significantly to advancing research.

### **Calls to action: Including youth voices in Arctic decision-making**

The authors of this article recognise that ensuring the meaningful inclusion of youth in Arctic decision-making requires systemic change and action-oriented approaches. As Emerging Arctic Leaders, we advocate for the following actions for both young and senior leaders to ensure youth voices become integral in shaping the Arctic’s future.

#### *Calls to action for young leaders*

##### 1. Be bold and proactive

Young leaders cannot afford to become part of the system that excludes future generations and created the crisis into which we have emerged. Young leaders must not fall into patterns of exclusion but must assertively use their voices to critique, support, and question existing systems. By being solutions-focused, young leaders can drive significant change for present and future generations.

##### 2. Foster collaboration and community

Young people should actively build partnerships with governments, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), businesses, and Indigenous communities. By respecting and addressing the diverse needs of different Arctic communities and co-creating knowledge, they can form enduring strategic alliances and strengthen connections across sectors. Building strategic partnerships with diverse stakeholders can amplify youth voices beyond dedicated youth spaces. These collaborations will strengthen connections among youth leaders in industry, academia, and communities, fostering joint solutions and reducing conflicts. By promoting and championing radical collaboration, young people can reshape today’s competitive world into one of inclusivity and cooperation.

### 3. Seek and provide mentorship

Young leaders should actively seek mentorship from current leaders, while also making commitments to mentor their peers and future generations. This dual role bridges gaps between senior and younger generations, enhancing the impact of youth in Arctic affairs.

### 4. Embrace leadership opportunities

When leadership or mentoring roles arise, young leaders should seize these opportunities, even if they seem daunting. By doing so, they can challenge the tokenistic involvement of youth and pave the way for genuine systemic change. Indeed, the tokenistic involvement of young voices mainly rests on the idea that young people cannot make any significant contributions. Only by not believing in the false ideas underlying the systemic exclusion of young voices can young leaders make systemic change, and eliminate youthwashing in the Arctic both today and for future generations.

### 5. Commit to lifelong learning

With these leadership roles comes more responsibility. Young leaders of today have to take responsibility for the actions which influence the Arctic's rapid development both today, and in the coming decades. Continual education and integration of diverse knowledge are therefore crucial. Doing so will guide young leaders into making informed decisions for current young generations, as well as future generations, facing issues within and beyond the Arctic.

#### *Calls to action for current senior Arctic leaders*

### 1. Promote Diversity and Inclusion

The Arctic is a diverse place, and those working on Arctic issues are even more diverse. Senior leaders must integrate youth voices into their structures by actively considering a diversity of factors like age, culture, gender, and socioeconomic background. This work will facilitate the change needed to reflect the perspectives and experiences of all youth continuously. There must be a focus on creating inclusive spaces where youth with dissenting opinions and different kinds of experiences can effectively engage with senior generations and their own diverse leaders. In turn, current young generations and future generations of the Arctic will be influentially engaged.

### 2. Redefine qualifications

Senior leaders must tailor application processes further towards youth, and effectively target youth who are affected by Arctic affairs but not already engaged in decision-making processes. Traditional metrics like "years of experience" should not dominate the selection processes.

### 3. Recognise youth as fellow leaders

Recognise the unique perspectives and skills of youth, allowing them to express opinions independently and participate as co-leaders in decision-making processes. Youth should be allowed to express opinions independently and have decision-making power, with senior leaders regarding them not just as individuals offering suggestions, but as co-leaders in the decision-making process. Youth must not only work on projects decided by non-youth; youth priorities must help guide decision-making on matters impacting the future of the Arctic.

### 4. Support Indigenous youth

The Arctic is the homeland of many Indigenous Peoples. Without recognising the importance of Indigenous youth in decision-making, Arctic youth engagement is rendered meaningless. Senior leaders must prioritise the inclusion of Indigenous youth in decision-making, supporting initiatives that preserve and develop Indigenous languages, Traditional Knowledge, and cultural practices. Tailored resources are essential for fostering leadership in Indigenous and Arctic communities while bearing in mind that the resources needed may look different in every community.

#### 5. Provide resources and opportunities

Young leaders struggle with insecure employment and financial barriers to participation. Ensure youth have access to financial resources, mentorship, and participation opportunities. Recognise that significant decisions often happen outside formal settings tied to financial status and family heritage and facilitate youth inclusion in these influential spaces. It is therefore not sufficient to only start a programme for youth inclusion; there also must be financial resources, opportunities, and skilled mentors to facilitate this work. Where there is funding already available for Arctic projects, it is imperative to include in the funding conditions that recipients must have a youth element to their project to ensure current funding is funnelled towards supporting the generations of today and tomorrow.

#### 6. Invest in education and networks

Young leaders are the leaders of today, not only the leaders of tomorrow. This does not negate the importance of mentorship, learning, and upskilling to young leaders. Establish mentorship networks and learning opportunities that cater to youth from diverse backgrounds. Approaches like peer-to-peer mentorship, experiential learning, and critical discussions are vital for preparing youth for leadership roles. In a youth context, ‘learning’, ‘experiencing’, ‘doing’, and ‘making change’ may all happen simultaneously at a time of rapid change.

#### 7. Integrate youth beyond youth-centric fora

The Arctic Frontiers Emerging Leaders who contributed to this paper agree on the importance of youth-centric fora. Dedicated spaces for young people allow them to network, take on leadership roles, and develop their voices in a supportive environment. However, while youth-centric spaces are valuable, youth should not be solely confined to them. Meaningful integration throughout a broader decision-making network is essential. Youth priorities must help guide decision-making on matters impacting the future of the Arctic. Including youth in non-traditional spaces, such as main stages at the conferences, policy roundtables, and high-level advisory boards fosters intergenerational dialogue and collaboration. The broader inclusion will help to fight tokenism and youthwashing and ensure that young people have a substantial role in shaping decisions that impact their futures.

In conclusion, these calls to action aim to transform youth participation from symbolic gestures to substantial contributions to inclusive Arctic governance. By embedding youth voices across decision-making processes, we can create a resilient and equitable Arctic future that respects and incorporates the perspectives of all generations. It is often stated today that the future of the Arctic now rests on the shoulders of young people, or, as Carabelly and Lyon (2016) stated, “young people are positioned in linear intergenerational relationships as the bearers of the future hopes”. Integrating the diversity of youth in senior decision-making by providing secure resources, acting on the different needs of different communities, and facilitating peer-to-peer and intergenerational

dialogue ensures that decisions impacting the Arctic are influenced by the youth who will be most influenced by those decisions. It is of utmost importance that, when these initiatives begin, they have the goal of supporting the inclusion of the youth from the Arctic and facilitating genuine youth involvement in decision-making processes. These initiatives cannot be just another tool to showcase young people's participation; youth's contributions must meaningfully impact the decisions made.

## **Conclusion**

The Arctic faces urgent and complex challenges that require governance that is both inclusive and forward-thinking. In this context, the active participation of young and local leaders is not just an ethical imperative, but a practical necessity. Young people, facing both environmental and economic challenges, are advocating for policies that promote intergenerational fairness—policies that do not sacrifice long-term climate resilience for short-term economic gains. Integrating youth perspectives into decision-making processes ensures that policies are equitable, sustainable, just, and attuned to the rapidly changing environmental and socio-political landscape of the Arctic. Despite the growing recognition of youth involvement in areas such as climate activism, youth participation often remains superficial. Too often, young people are used as tokens rather than being empowered as genuine stakeholders. This tokenistic involvement — whether confined to activist roles or restricted to specific issues — undermines their potential contributions across the spectrum of Arctic governance. The transformative power of youth leadership lies in their ability to challenge classical approaches, leverage digital tools for advocacy, and foster intergenerational dialogue. Their contributions are particularly crucial in addressing climate change and other pressing Arctic issues where innovative and urgent solutions are required. Youth involvement in decision-making is essential for crafting future imaginaries that are inclusive and reflective of their aspirations. However, systemic barriers, including hierarchical structures and limited access to resources, often diminish their impact.

To move forward effectively, we must create inclusive spaces where diverse youth and Indigenous perspectives can meaningfully influence decisions at all levels. This involves providing secure resources, development opportunities, and ensuring that youth are integrated into broader networks rather than relegated to token roles. Initiatives such as mentorship, tailored education, and capacity-building are critical for enabling young leaders to participate effectively and exert real influence. Addressing these challenges and enhancing the role of youth leadership is vital for ensuring that the perspectives and needs of future generations are integral to decision-making in the Arctic. The future of the Arctic depends on the meaningful inclusion of young and diverse voices in its governance. Young people play a crucial role in steering the Arctic towards a sustainable and equitable future. Empowering youth today is crucial for fostering resilient and just societies, ensuring the Arctic remains a liveable and thriving region for generations to come. This commitment to intergenerational justice recognises that young leaders are not merely the future; they are essential actors and leaders in shaping the present.

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