

Non-state observers in the Arctic Council – Exploring participation patterns in the PAME Working Group

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Arctic Governance relies on relations between different Arctic and global actors. As the Arctic Council is a key actor within Arctic Governance, this study takes a closer look at its inter-organizational relations with its non-state observers and explores how observers actually observe. Because of the tense situation in Arctic cooperation, it is again necessary to reflect on the observers' contribution to the Arctic Council and consequentially to Arctic Governance. This way, conclusions can be drawn about the extent to which specifically non-state observers will continue to be relevant in the future. Building on the STAPAC dataset from Knecht (2017), where stakeholder participation in Arctic Council and sub-body meetings are summarized, this study adds data of observer participation after 2017. Here, I take the PAME working group of the Arctic Council as starting point and analyse observer attendance of ministerial, SAO and working group meetings. Apart from the participation data, the basis for analysis are observers reports and reviews, and other official documents from the Arctic Council. This article aims at revealing patterns and mechanisms of observing. Drawing on the sociological neo-institutionalist perspective, observers are conceptualized as an organizational field that relates to the Arctic Council. This relational perspective allows us to gain an understanding of how non-state observers participate and what roles they can have within the Arctic Council. This study shows that non-state observers play a vital role in embedding Arctic issues in the larger global context.

Introduction

Due to climate change, Arctic livelihoods, environment and biodiversity are at risk. As the climate crisis is a global problem, it affects global society. The Arctic is thus a global region of interest. Beyond climate issues, it also triggers economic interests due to the potential for shipping routes and natural resources (Young, 2019a). Thus, there is an increase of actors that want to partake in the region beyond the Arctic states and the peoples living there. These are states, non-state and transnational actors, and local and global actors who wish to have an influence in and on the Arctic. This is mirrored in the work of the Arctic Council (AC) and is best visible through its high number of (non-Arctic) observer states and organizations. They are allies to the AC, for example by supporting the AC's working groups or research projects either financially or with expertise

(Rottem, 2016: 157). The discussions about observers and their role in the AC are a recurring theme in and around debates about Arctic Governance. Knecht (2017b) found that “[...] the way AC enlargement has been politicized in recent years is disproportionate to observers’ actual presence as a necessary condition for influencing Council proceedings” (Knecht, 2017b: 217). Building on these discussions, this study explores observer engagement by zooming in on one of the six Working Groups of the AC and how observers participate there. Through the lens of sociological neo-institutionalism, observer engagement is conceptualized as a special form of inter-organizational relations, more specifically as an organizational field that relates to the AC rather than to one policy field. From this perspective, I explore how non-state observers actually *observe*, by analysing their participation quota, patterns and roles. Accordingly, this study traces similarities and differences amongst observers. It focuses on the PAME working group since 2016 as a case study. By zooming in on observer participation through one Working Group, the study provides a deeper understanding of what “observer” status in the AC entails and what mechanisms exist in the inter-organizational cooperation between the AC and its observers. Marine governance is highly international and demands cooperation on multiple levels. Thus, this is an important starting point to analyse inter-organizational cooperation with the AC. The second focus lies on non-state observers and can be explained from two perspectives. The first reason is the observation that from 2004 until 2017 there were no new organizational observers admitted to the AC. Between 2017 and 2019 however, a total of six organizations became observers, many of which have a marine specialization. The second perspective is derived from the fact that observer states tend to have different communication channels and opportunities to engage in Arctic affairs, making them rather distinct actors from organizations. For example, observer states can make use of their bilateral relations with Arctic states and other fora.

Observers in the Arctic Council

The AC as a high-level intergovernmental forum that is associated with its scientific output for environmental protection and by a variety of actors. It stands out through its inclusion of Arctic Indigenous Peoples organizations, the permanent participants (PP) and its cooperation with various regional and global observers (Rottem, 2020a: 4f). While it is clear why the Arctic Indigenous rightsholders are part of the AC, the role of observers is somewhat contested. Although one could subsume all of the actors and categories under the umbrella of “Arctic Council membership” (Rottem, 2016: 158), this appears to be a shortcut to a highly complex structure of relations, responsibilities and rights. Debates around the AC’s need to open up more for transnational and global cooperation (Young, 2019b) relates to the idea that the Arctic is a piece of the global puzzle rather than a remote space: “[...] it is necessary and high time to understand the Arctic as a ‘globally embedded space’ that is inextricably linked to global climatic, environmental, economic and political systems and processes” (Keil & Knecht, 2017: 4).

Although observers do not have any decision-making capacities like the member states or consultative rights like the permanent participants, they are included in different organizational structures or processes, which presents the question of whether, or to what extent, observers are part of the organization or simply part of the organizational environment. I argue that observers are not directly part of the AC: the AC communicates clearly and unequivocally that membership is based on geography and sovereign territories in the Arctic. Thus, the AC differentiates poignantly between Arctic actors and others and in their semantics. Observer have to apply for their presence in the AC and meet certain expectations (Arctic Council, 2013b). Accordingly, I understand them

as one specific form of inter-organizational relations that is supposed to increase exchange with actors from the AC's complex environment. This will be explained further in the next chapter.

The AC observers represent an especially interesting case for two reasons: First, the AC has more than 38 observers, which are almost equally divided in the three different actor types (Arctic Council, 2024), strongly outweighing the members and PPs by numbers. Secondly, observers in the AC are expected to not only acknowledge the AC's authority and observe its processes but to contribute to the AC's work (Arctic Council, 2013a). It's clear that observer engagement here is not just a symbolic gesture, since even in the AC's *Strategic Plan for the decade*, the AC highlights the cooperation with observers and encourages "[...] their proactive engagement in relevant activities of the Council" (Arctic Council, 2021: 7).

The process of becoming an observer and the procedures of acting as an observer are regulated (Arctic Council, o.A.; Arctic Council, 2013a). Some might even say the rules are quite detailed for an intergovernmental forum without a legal foundation (Graczyk & Koivurova, 2014: 229). The formal criteria for observer admission include the requirement to recognize authority of Arctic states and international legal frameworks, such as UNCLOS, and respect the PPs. Applicants should also demonstrate political willingness and financial ability to contribute to PPs and their work, demonstrate interest and expertise for the AC, and have demonstrated a concrete interest and ability to support the work of the AC, including through partnerships with member states and PPs. They should bring Arctic concerns to global decision-making bodies (Arctic Council, 2024). When admitted, observers are obliged to report every two years about their contributions and to show their on-going interest and merit to the AC (Arctic Council, 2013a). Additionally, observers are reviewed every four years by the ACS.

The rules for observer engagement are set in the Ottawa Declaration, but the composition of observer engagement has evolved over time. Participation in AC meetings used to be simple until the interested actors became practical problems, for example regarding the size of the venue (Shadian, 2017: 52f). Between 2011 and 2013 the AC refined its observer rules with the amendment of the rules of procedure (Arctic Council, 2013b) and the Observer manual for subsidiary bodies (Arctic Council, 2013a). Graczyk et al. (2017) understand these rules as an "attempt to socialise observer behaviour through mechanisms of conditionality" (Graczyk et al., 2017: 122). It is noticeable that the huge interest in the Arctic and the number of observers has created the urgency to make changes. Graczyk and Koivurova (2014) studied "possible effects of the new rules for AC observers when considering external actors' inclusion within Arctic governance" (Graczyk & Koivurova, 2014: 225) and traced the evolution of observer engagement from the AEPS to the new observer rules of the AC. One possible explanation for these rules could be the fear of the PP's of being marginalized in the face of observer enlargement (Humrich, 2017b: 91) and that powerful states would push for more influence (Graczyk et al., 2017: 122). Another way of looking at reporting and reviewing is that it can strengthen the credibility of observers and of the AC by incentivizing continuous interest and action: "[...] that observer status in the Arctic Council has a price tag, and requires sustained interest, capacity and relevant expertise to contribute to Arctic science and knowledge production" (Knecht, 2015).

This argument relates from the study by Knecht, where observer activity in the AC is categorized as "different worlds of commitment" (Knecht, 2017a: 172), varying from "late bloomer", "regular visitor" to "overachiever". The study finds that some observers do not make full use of their

observer rights. It concludes that observer participation is not a ‘one way street’ but needs commitment from the observers and the AC equally (Knecht, 2017a: 181). This is an important point to follow up on, because if observers do not participate, then why are they thematized so much? Motivations for participating in the AC can vary “from purely scientific to economic and strategic” (Graczyk & Koivurova, 2014: 226). For states, enhancing their own status in the international community or geopolitical considerations may also be motivations (Filimonova, Obydenkova, & Rodrigues Vieira, 2023).

Studies about observer cooperation tend to put the focus on observer states, like the involvement of Asian states that gained observer status in 2013 (Hong, 2021; Stephen & Stephen, 2020) or on major IOs. One of the most frequent external IOs that is examined is the EU (Bailes & Ólafsson, 2017; Paul, 2021; Raspotnik & Stępień, 2020) or the International Maritime Organization (IMO) (Basaran, 2017; Hebbar, Schröder-Hinrichs, Mejia, Deggim, & Pristrom, 2020; Molenaar, 2014). In her study of non-state observers and their actual influence on the AC, Wehrmann compares WWF and CCU and their roles within the EPPR and a task force (Wehrmann, 2017). She ascertains that observers have some influence on agenda-setting and policy formulation to varying degrees (Wehrmann, 2017). A broader picture on non-state observers is illustrated by Sellheim and Menezes (2022), who have integrated various papers that deal with different non-state actors and their role in the Arctic in their edited volume (Sellheim & Menezes, 2022). For example, it zooms in on the UArctic (Nicol, Beaulieu, & Hirshberg, 2022), IASC (Łuszczuk & Szkarlat, 2022) and the Nordic Council of Ministers and the West Nordic Council (Caddell, 2022). Platjouw et al. (2018) take on a another approach by showing how the cooperation between AMAP and UNEP (as an observer) has contributed to creating a legal outcome through the Minamata Convention on Mercury.

Yet, theorizations on observer engagement and the observer category are rare. This paper attempts a theoretical conceptualization of observers and underlines it with empirical findings. A concrete understanding of what observers mean to the AC could help assess future scenarios for Arctic cooperation. Considering the current state of global politics due to the Russian war against Ukraine since 2022, debates about observer engagement gain new importance. The most recent debates were held at the Arctic Frontiers conference where discussions suggested that the crisis could function as a turning point for the way in which the AC makes use of its observers. But as suggested by Knecht’s data set on stakeholder participation in AC ministerial, SAO and working group meetings (STAPAC) (Knecht, 2016), not all types of observers exhaust the potential given through their formal role. In this study, I use that as starting point to focus on organizational observers and their participation patterns in the policy field of marine governance.

Between organization and environment: Observers as an organizational field

The observers are actors of the AC’s environment. They cooperate more closely than other actors with the AC and have formalized access to the organization. Accordingly, the observers function similarly to an organizational field (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983) in the organization’s environment. As prerequisite to this concept, one must understand the sociological neo-institutionalist lens of organizations and their environments. This lens understands organizations as entities that differentiate themselves from their organizational environment but are in constant interaction with it. In spite of formal organizational boundaries, open systems are not monolithic entities (Scott, 1992: 77). In the case of the AC, which is here conceptualized as an *open system*, it consists of various elements that are loosely connected rather than being one collective. These differentiated elements

are for instance the member states, the PPs, but also the Working Groups and the secretariats (Arctic Council Secretariat and Indigenous Peoples Secretariat).

Organizations are faced with an environment that is coined by uncertainty and instability (Duncan & Weiss, 1979: 11f). This environment entails a high number of information, events and influences. What the organization reacts to and perceives as important stimuli are thus constructed as their environment. This shows the interdependency between the organization and its environment, since organizational decisions can be influenced by the environment and by questions of material or ideational resources (Koch, 2008: 110). Organizations can be changed or pressured by their environment and through their reciprocal relations (Koch, 2008: 106). Adaptation to changes in the organizational environment is based on the interest to stabilize and preserve themselves as organization by external legitimization. The increased interest in the Arctic after the Arctic Council Impact Assessment (ACIA) report in 2005 created changes in the AC's environment (Spence, 2017: 801), which the AC reacted to by admitting more observers and by expanding the rules.

This also meant the expansion of the organizational field of observers, since they have accompanied the AC from the beginning. An organizational field is defined as “a community of organizations that partakes of a common meaning system and whose participants interact more frequently and fatefully with one another than with actors outside of the field” (Scott, 1994: 207f). They are key actors, that share resources and a shared understanding of an institution, or a policy field (Wooten, 2015: 375). Thereby, the organizational field consists of “those organizations that, in the aggregate, constitute an area of institutional life” (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983: 148). Members of the organizational field remain independent, however, and follow their own interests and aims (DiMaggio, 1988), which is how they can invoke adaptation processes for the institution and the field.

Adaptation processes in an organizational field can be explained through isomorphism. Building on previous research, DiMaggio and Powell (1983) have extended the understanding of isomorphism, particularly by introducing three forms of institutional isomorphism. They argue that in organizational fields organizations tend to (over time) display similar features and behavior (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983: 148f). Isomorphism can be induced in different ways: *coercive* by pressure from political authorities and legitimacy issues, *mimetic* when organizations react homogeneously when faced with uncertainty or *normative* by an increase of professionalism in organizations (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983: 150–156). Heucher (2019) stresses that organizational fields are about interactions amongst organizations in its field: “For its participants, the organizational field is about struggle and contestation, but it may also be about collaboration” (Heucher, 2019: 75). Although organizations can have specific features and consequently positions (peripheral or core) within an field, they are constantly faced with the flexibility of positions in an organizational field (Heucher, 2019: 76).

Another challenge organizations can face is the possible discrepancy between the formal, representative appearances and the actual working level. The former signifies the formal structures or goals that are communicated to the environment to meet external expectations. The latter, in contrast, are the day-to-day procedures that are only communicated internally and vary to what extent they meet the external expectations or if they do so at all. This process of *decoupling* enables the organization to accumulate resources and legitimacy without making concessions in their daily activities (Meyer & Rowan, 1977: 356–359). As a consequence, it becomes more difficult to grasp

anything beyond the representational level which in fact could mean that organizational fields that were previously considered homogenous, could vary on their practical working procedures. Meyer and Rowan (1977) conclude that decoupling is a solution to bridging frictions between internal processes and the environmental influence (Meyer & Rowan, 1977: 359f). Though decoupling is often addressed in the context of one organization, this concept is included to explore mechanisms of cooperation between observers and the AC as inter-organizational decoupling.

Although observers could be subsumed simply as stakeholders, this terminology does not suffice to precisely grasp the category. Stakeholders are “actors who are either significantly affected by an institution or capable of affecting it” (Stokke, 2014: 772). However, stakeholders encompass far more actors and groups, for instance Arctic conferences, such as Arctic Circle or Arctic Frontiers (Steinveg, 2023). To add, observers cannot for the sake of simplicity be categorized as members either. They have a particular role for the AC and are simultaneously included and excluded. The category of observers signifies an overlap of the internal world and external environment. As an organizational field, observers are positioned at the AC’s organizational boundaries. Organizational “boundaries necessarily address what is outside the organization, not just what is inside” (Santos & Eisenhardt, 2005: 505). In the AC’s case, members and PPs being on the inside and observers at the outside. The main difference between observers and members is that observers are not core members of the organization but are an addition to it. Observers need to earn the right to participate through their application and their merit, and can also lose this right or not make use of it. This relational theoretical frame helps to explore the role of observers and offers opportunities to trace mechanisms that influence the field.

Methods: Tracing observer participation

This contribution has two aims: first, on the example of the PAME Working Group, this study will supplement the data compilation from Knecht (2016) showing observer participation in the AC bodies. This first step clarifies if there are decoupling mechanisms visible through the participation quota. This traces Knecht’s assessment that observers do not fulfil their role and are not even always present at meetings (Knecht, 2017b). After revealing the participation trends of non-state observers relating to PAME, the data is discussed in the context of observer reports, observer reviews, PAME meeting protocols from 2016 until 2021, which were available in the respective online archives, and in the context of secondary literature. Reports from the project *Strengthening Observer Engagement Shipping Related Activities* led by PAME observers were also considered. This triangulation addresses patterns and mechanisms of observation and roles of non-state observers.

It should be mentioned that the European Union (EU) is not included as a non-state observer in this study, since its status is a special case as an ad-hoc observer or observer in principle. Additionally, the EU’s demeanour resembles more to those of states and it is often addressed in the same way states are. Examples for this is its participation in the Warsaw format and Arctic Science Ministerial, which may not be organized by the AC itself, but shows that the EU has a different standing than other non-state observers.

This study starts with the analysis of one working group, although this could be replicated for other working groups as well. Although Marine Governance is a policy field that touches the work of more than one Working Group, the one which deals with it the most is PAME. Thus, the case at hand sets a particular focus on PAME projects and cooperation but is not limited to it. PAME is an important pillar of Arctic Marine Governance and describes itself as follows: “PAME is the

focal point of the Arctic Council's activities related to the protection and sustainable use of the Arctic marine environment and provides a unique forum for collaboration on a wide range of activities in this regard" (PAME, 2024). Marine governance enjoys particular attention in this decade, because of the UN's sustainability agenda and the Decade of Ocean Science for Sustainable Development 2021-2030. This initiative is supposed to strengthen scientific cooperation of various scientists and other stakeholders and encourage science-based strategies to the 2030 Agenda (UNESCO, 2024). In a similar trend, Arctic politics has furthered legal regimes on marine safety in Arctic waters. Particularly the implementation of the Polar Code (International Code for Ships Operating in Polar Waters 2017) and the Central Arctic Ocean Fisheries Agreement show progress in marine safety (Brigham & Gamble, 2022: 173).

The increase of interest or activity in Ocean governance can also be traced by looking at the recently added observer organizations. Table 1 shows the most recent additions to the observer group in the AC, after the ministerial meeting in Kiruna in 2013. Two things are striking: Oceana is the only NGO that has gained observer status recently. In fact, the last NGO to be permitted was the Arctic Institute of North America (AINA) in the ministerial meeting in Reykjavík in 2004. For IOs, the trend was similar until the ministerial meeting in Fairbanks 2017, because in this category the last observer addition was Nordic Environment Finance Corporation (NEFCO), also in 2004. The other element that stands out is that most of them have a strong focus on marine issues. Both underline that a case study of non-state observers in the Arctic marine context is relevant.

Table 1. Observer expansion since after the Kiruna expansion (Compiled by author)

Year of Admission	Type	Observer
Fairbanks, 2017	IO	International Council for the Exploration of the Sea (ICES)
Fairbanks, 2017	IO	OSPAR Commission
Fairbanks, 2017	IO	West Nordic Council (WNC)
Fairbanks, 2017	IO	World Meteorological Organization (WMO)
Fairbanks, 2017	NGO	Oceana
Fairbanks, 2017	State	Switzerland
Rovaniemi, 2019	IO	International Maritime Organization (IMO)

To observe or to participate?

By conceptualizing observers as an organizational field, this study focuses not only on the relationship between the AC (or its working groups) with its observers, but it also includes how observers relate to the AC and to each other. This broader perspective explains how Arctic cooperation through the AC's observer category works and what it could entail. Apart from the exchange of resources, efforts to collaborate or competitions within the field of observers are also addressed. Since the observer category is highly institutionalized and regulated, I argue that isomorphic patterns of observing are induced by the AC. The analysis should identify further patterns, mechanisms and roles of observing in the AC.

Participation in PAME, SAO and ministerial meetings

To start the empirical examination of observer engagement, at first, the focus lies on participation behaviour of non-state observers in PAME. Table 2 shows the participation frequencies of all the observer IOs and NGOs that were present in PAME working groups meetings since 2016. It shows a high frequency of participation to PAME meetings by both types of actors. In total 16 observer organizations (half each) were present. There were 12 meetings in total. The meeting with the highest number of non-state observer participation is the second one in September 2020, due to how the pandemic meetings were held online for the first time in September 2020 and onwards (cf. PAME II 2020, PAME I 2021 and PAME II 2021). This can be an explanation for the participation of ten observers in 2020, particularly concerning NGO observers who have smaller resources.

Table 2. Participation frequencies in the last 12 PAME meetings since 2016 (Compiled by author)

Observer	Type	I 2016	II 2016	I 2017	II 2017	I 2018	II 2018	I 2019	II 2019	I 2020	II 2020	I 2021	II 2021	Σ
ACOPS	NGO											-	X	1
WWF	NGO	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	-	X	11
CCU	NGO	X	X	X	X	X		X	X	X	X	-	X	10
Oceana	NGO				X	X		X	X	X	X	-	X	7
NF	NGO					X		X	X	X	X	-	X	6
IASC	NGO		X		X				X		X	-	X	5
AINA	NGO							X	X		X	-		3
UArctic	NGO				X					X		-		2
UNEP	IO	X	X		X	X	X		X	X	X	-	X	9
ICES	IO										X	-		1
OSPAR	IO		O	O	X	X		X		X	X	-		5-7
IMO	IO								X	X	X	-	X	3-4
WMO	IO						X			X	X	-		3
NCM	IO							X				-		1
NEFCO	IO								X			-		1
IUCN	IO					X						-		1

X = observer; O = invited expert

Keeping in mind that most of the listed IO observer were non-observers until 2017 or 2019, the participation rate is rather remarkable. This can of course also be attributed to the fact that they are new, eager to contribute, and that this might wear off. However, especially OSPAR shows constant interest for PAME's work, as representatives were invited as experts before OSPAR became an observer. An explanation for this could be the observer application process in 2015, where OSPAR was rejected by the AC (Knecht, 2015). Participating in PAME meetings as an

invited guest and being in the good graces with specific actors in the AC or a Working Group can positively affect the application process.

Low participation from the Nordic Environment Finance Cooperation (NEFCO) and the Nordic Council of Ministers (NCM) could be tied to the fact that these IOs are not specialized in this policy field. In contrast, UNEP presents itself as a reliable, longstanding partner to PAME from its participation frequency. Amongst the NGO observers, Oceana is quite active and present at nearly every PAME meeting since its admission. Prior to 2021, ACOPS did not participate in meetings. Here it is sensible to assume that ACOPS made use of the digital format of the meetings in 2021. In comparison, WWF and CCU participated (almost) regularly and WWF often so, with more than one representative. WWF has been referred to as the most active NGO observer previously by Knecht (Knecht, 2017b: 211), which this data supports. Next to these 'overachievers,' it should be mentioned that NF and IASC also participated in approximately half of the meetings, showing continuous interest in PAME's work.

In order to get a broader picture of how the aforementioned observers in PAME generally engage, the participation in ministerial and SAO meetings must also be addressed. Table 3 shows the participation of the non-state observers from the aforementioned PAME meetings in ministerial meetings. This table clearly illustrates that NGO observers show a higher participation rate, but this is partly due to the later admission of some of the IO observers.

Table 3. Participation frequencies in the Ministerial meetings from 2017-2023 (Compiled by author)

Observer	Type	2017	2019	2021	Σ
ACOPS	NGO	X	-	X	2
WWF	NGO	X	X	X	3
CCU	NGO	X	X	X	3
Oceana	NGO	-	X	X	2
NF	NGO	X	X	X	3
IASC	NGO	X	X	X	3
AINA	NGO	X	X	-	2
UArctic	NGO	X	X	X	3
UNEP	IO	X	X	X	3
ICES	IO	-	X	X	2
OSPAR	IO	-	-	X	1
IMO	IO	-	-	X	1
WMO	IO	-	X	X	2
NCM	IO	X	X	X	3
NEFCO	IO	X	X	X	3
IUCN	IO	X	-	X	2

Table 4. Participation frequencies in the SAO meetings since 2016 (Compiled by author)

Observer	Type	I 2016	II 2016	I 2017	II 2017	I 2018	II 2018	I 2019	II 2019	I 2020	II2020	I 2021	II 2021	Σ
		USA	USA	USA	FIN	FIN	FIN	FIN	ICE	ICE	ICE	ICE	RUS	
ACOPS	NGO									X	X	X		3
WWF	NGO	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	12
CCU	NGO	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	12
Oceana	NGO					X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	8
NF	NGO	X		X	X	X	X			X	X	X	X	9
IASC	NGO	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	12
AINA	NGO	X	X		X	X	X	X		X		X	X	9
UArctic	NGO	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	12
UNEP	IO	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	12
ICES	IO										X			1
OSPAR	IO				X	X								2
IMO	IO			O					X	X		X	X	5
WMO	IO				X	X		X	X	X		X	X	7
NCM	IO	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X		X	X	11
NEFCO	IO	X	X	X	X	X	X	X		X		X	X	10
IUCN	IO											X		1

X = observer; O = invited expert

Capacities and roles

As mentioned, the high number of observers in the AC is sometimes viewed as a point of contestation (Humrich, 2017b: 91). At first glance, it might appear confusing that to have non-Arctic, global observers in the AC, whilst one of its special features is the inclusion of Indigenous voices. Especially because PPs fear that their perspectives and position in the AC would be downsized through external actors (Chater, 2019: 160). Since the category of PPs is an evolution from their observer status back in the AEPS (Cambou & Koivurova, 2020), there might be suspicions whether this could be repeated with exceptional observers in the AC. But as one criterion for observer admission is the respect and support of the PPs, one can trace not only the importance of the Indigenous standpoints, but also the observers' necessity to try to foster relations with PPs. The Inuit Circumpolar Council (ICC), for example, recently became an Observer NGO to the IMO, which shows that there is an interest to cooperate. Additionally, PPs are supported by various non-state observers: One might assume that funding would not fall under the NGO observers' contributions. However, several of them fund the PPs, for example by covering travel expenses for workshops or conferences (International Arctic Science Committee, 2020: 6).

Many observers stress their intention to cooperate with the PPs: “we hope to engage more fully and directly with Arctic Council Permanent Participants in the coming years as part of our expanding role as observers” (Oceana, 2020: 6). This could be seen as a consequence of coercive isomorphism, through the observer criterion of acknowledging PPs and traditional knowledge. However, it also falls under mimetic isomorphism, where traditional and Indigenous knowledge is all-around in Arctic Governance. Including them increases one’s own legitimacy and helps to understand the Arctic better. WWF for example, participated in a Training Workshop for Permanent Participants to improve ways of engaging with PPs (World Wide Fund for Nature Arctic Programme, 2016: 6). The latest example of an integrated approach to knowledge production could be seen at the Third EA International Conference 2024, co-organized by the Norwegian Chairship, ICES and WWF in Tromsø. This conference put a strong emphasis on Indigenous knowledge holders and the co-production of knowledge from ‘Western science’ and different Indigenous communities (Participatory Observation by the author). This way, observers strengthen the inclusion of Indigenous knowledge holders. It is, however, difficult to ascertain to what extent the engagement with PPs is incorporated in the observers’ work.

What is certain is that observers seek to strengthen their own role. In the project *Strengthening Observer Engagement Shipping Related Activities* (PAME, 2020a), state and non-state observers express how participation in PAME could be more effective. The suggestions include that newer observers wish to strengthen their position in the Working Group and look to experienced observers to lead them as possible *observer coordinators*. This way, they advocate for more formalized procedures and roles in PAME to increase and focus their input (PAME, 2020a). These suggestions confirm that the observer rule amendments “only defer the problem of inclusion” (Humrich, 2017a: 157), since observers still seek more integration and to exhaust their full potential as partners to working groups.

However, some NGO observers do not have the financial capacities to exhaust their roles as observers. ACOPS is one example which has requested for an increased digital meeting format, so that they might increase their presence at meetings (ACOPS, 2021: 4). This request was repeated in the draft for the aforementioned PAME project on enhancing efficiency and participation. As a project-funded entity, IUCN is also at times lacking funding, which explains its low participation rate. In one report, IUCN explains itself by sharing that at the moment of reporting, there was no project which could finance attention in AC meetings (International Union for Conservation of Nature, 2020: 6). Financial contributions can be a vital part of observing, depending on the IO’s mandate and function. Looking at the NCM, they emphasize their financial contributions (NCM, 2020). Since the NCM’s mandate does not focus too much on the marine policy field, it takes over the role of a funder for AC projects for the most part. Similarly, the Nordic NEFCO is a special case, since it contributes “[...] in its unique capacity as the Fund Manager of the Arctic Council Project Support Instrument and partly as an IFI funding environmental projects in the region” (Observer report - NEFCO, 2021: 4).

Since observers have different organizational aims, it also makes sense that their specific roles can differ as well. As one group of observers are NGOs, it is not surprising that advocacy is a part of observing. As a reliable and well-known partner, WWF uses its reports to stress its commitment but also to make remarks on shortcomings and to make demands towards the Arctic states. For example, it warned that Arctic states are not fulfilling their roles as the prime stewards of the region” in the Scorecard of the AC in 2019 (World Wide Fund for Nature Arctic Programme, 2020:

5). Hereby, WWF makes use of its close relations with the AC, to criticize and drive the AC towards more action in regards to environmental protection. This behaviour shows the WWF's authenticity, in a similar way to its current condemnation of Norway's recent decision to pursue deep sea mining (WWF, 2024).

Generally, the findings adjoin to previous literature that IO and NGO observers show similar participation patterns (Knecht, 2017b: 211), even though in this PAME case study, NGO observers show a slightly higher participation in working group, SAO and ministerial level meetings. At first glimpse, this might be surprising since one would expect NGOs to be lacking capacities to join meetings. However, as shown before, there are mechanisms that facilitate the participation, i.e. online participation and the cooperation with other organizations. IASC emphasizes that its inter-organizational cooperation with PAME has improved, since IASC's secretariat is located in Akureyri close to the PAME secretariat (International Arctic Science Committee, 2020: 5). This shows that observer interest can be maintained or increased, if meetings and staff are easily accessed.

Collaboration and mobilization

Comparing observers to an organizational field, one would assume that collaboration between observers is a natural extension of their world. There are many examples of such collaborative efforts. IO and NGO observers also co-organize or fund thematic workshops. CCU and WWF team up for various projects, as for example the Marine Protected Areas (MPA) Network Toolbox project. As both NGOs demonstrate a high frequency, one can conclude that cooperation is facilitated through these frequent meetings and exchanges. Another example of collaboration amongst the field of observers is that CCU has occasionally sent representatives from other NGOs, such as Oceana to task force meetings. This way, Oceana was involved even before it gained official observer status (Wehrmann, 2017: 197). To what extent this practice is viable and welcomed by the AC is not clear. However, it enables actors to establish themselves for Working Groups and to make an impression. However, NGOs do not only collaborate amongst themselves, as WWF and OSPAR collaborate with Canada on Underwater noise in Arctic waters (PAME, 2018: 7). The data does not provide insight, regarding patterns of competition within the field of observers. Even if there are struggles and competition amongst observers, for example to take the leading part in a project, this would be hard to trace in the official reports.

As Stokke and Hønneland (2006) stated over ten years ago: the AC has a remarkable feature of political mobilization. Certain IO and NGO observers have proven to be reliable partners for PAME, which underlines the mobilization power of the Arctic marine issues for a broad variety of actors. Matters of international marine concern are prepared, discussed and contextualized within PAME, which makes it even more important to participate for observers, as it is visible through the discussions, interpretations and calls to implement the Polar Code. Hereby, especially observer states are addressed. The IMO, however, is a good example of the reciprocal relation between PAME and its observers. In its review, the IMO does not only describe their efforts for PAME but rather encourage “[...] to indicate their interest in collaborating with the IMO in order to deliver future joint activities [...]. Such collaboration could include, among others, providing expertise [...], contributing financially in order to develop training material or the hosting of national and/or regional events for promoting the IMO Polar Code” (International Maritime Organization, 2022: 8).

In this context, PAME and its organizational observers rely on each other's expertise and they exchange resources. Through this exchange, PAME and its observers maintain a network of Arctic marine expertise and keep each other up to date on important issues. This is also the case with the ICES/PICES/PAME-Working Group for Integrated Ecosystem Assessment of the Central Arctic Ocean, where reports are "shared with PAME prior to being published as a Cooperative Research Report" (PAME, 2020b: 30). In addition to this, it should be noted that the increased inter-cooperation of the AC Working Groups (Rottem, 2020b: 3) also expands this network. The other side of this is that organizational observers can also have a valuable role in maintaining or expanding this network on a more global scale by using their knowledge from PAME to embed it in a wider world political context. Thus, cooperating with PAME offers mutually beneficial exchange. Rather than competing, observers seek to harmonize strategies through their embeddedness in various global fora, as shown by this note by ACOPS:

[...] parallel work streams are on-going in other intergovernmental organisations including the IMO, the LC/LP and OSPAR. ACOPS also takes part in parallel working groups established in these other fora thereby allowing for enhanced sharing of the work across the bodies and supporting the development of an overall consistent governance framework (ACOPS, 2021: 6).

This illustrates the relevance of normative isomorphism in the case of organizational observers in PAME, since their contributions are based on scientific expertise and the fact that these experts have similar backgrounds and education. Similarities and streamlining emerge through these cooperations that exist amongst observers beyond the AC, as Oceana, WWF and ACOPS, NAMMCO and UNEP and AMAP are observers to OSPAR to name just one example (OSPAR Commission, 2024). Thus, isomorphic patterns are mostly visible in the way observers contribute and it is not surprising due to the framework of the AC, the Arctic context, and the scientific emphasis of the AC. Generating and spreading knowledge is the underlying driver of Arctic cooperation: "The engine of Arctic governance that produces cooperation and collaboration at the circumpolar scale runs on unique knowledges that have been the 'fuel' of Arctic exceptionalism" (Spence, Alexander, Røvdén, & Harriger, 2023: 12).

Inter-organizational decoupling

Working Groups are spaces where observers can get a real peak behind the AC curtains and can take part in the actual work of the Council. In contrast, the ministerial meetings could be viewed as the representational level. The working Groups are often referred to as the engines or "the heart of the Council itself" (Rottem, 2020a: 21). They give a better understanding of what needs to be done, what can be done, and by whom. The Working Groups are where observers should aim to partake and increase their presence. It is surprising then, that participation rates in ministerial meetings are the highest. However, there is a political relevance of such meetings not only to observer states but also organizations. All in all, even non-state observers that did not have high participation rates, could at least through reporting, show if and how much interest they still have. In this case study about PAME, there are some non-state observers that are less committed than others. However, the data had shown evidence for ambitious and continuous inter-organizational cooperation between PAME and several of its non-state observers.

Hints of decoupling mechanisms can be found in the project about Project *Strengthening Observer Engagement Shipping Related Activities* in PAME. Observers argue for more efficiency to enhance their

ability to contribute, stating that systemic and institutional infrastructure could be adapted in some regards. Although the observer category is constructed by design, observers feel as though their contributions are restricted or underrepresented. For instance, they wish to "increase transparency in the decision-making process to show Observers that their recommendations are being incorporated into decisions" (PAME, 2020a: 8). This underlines the reciprocal nature of the cooperation between observers and the AC. Rather than simply contributing and taking information for their own organizational aims, some observers seek to distinguish themselves through their ideas and expertise in the AC. The actual working level needs further examination beyond document analysis, to fully grasp mechanisms of inter-organizational decoupling.

Conclusion and outlook

Ultimately, the "different worlds of commitment" (Knecht, 2017a) are still clear in observer engagement, but there are also certain patterns of similarity that can be observed. These emerge primarily from the normative and coercive isomorphism amongst non-state observers. The harmonized observer engagement emerges from the main driver of working groups: to produce scientific recommendations. This is the anchor of the normative isomorphism amongst the field of observers. While this process comes about rather naturally within the organizational field, the Observer rules and amendments by the AC also factor into the way observers contribute. Even though it was not regulated at this level, already during the AEPS observers were a relevant addition to tackling Arctic environmental issues (Graczyk & Koivurova, 2014: 227f). However, there is a clear asymmetry of power that is enforced through the observer rules. Although some observers still do not exhaust their full potential, the reviewing process and the biennale reporting pose higher expectations on them. With the reporting system, observers become obliged to make at least a minimum effort. It also raises the stakes of non-participation, since it could send a negative signal or even invoke sanctions. Accordingly, some observers use the reporting to explain, when they have fallen short. However, coercive isomorphism is not at the centre of the organizational field of observers. What stands out, is the high level of professionalization and expertise, similar aims and outputs, that result in similarities amongst non-state observers. This way observers assist the AC in its core efforts: "generating knowledge on the region, raising awareness of changes in the Arctic in the outside world and, in some instances, even influencing broader regulatory developments" (Smieszek, 2019: 6). This study shows that non-state observers play a vital role in this regard and in embedding Arctic issues and knowledge in the larger global context.

The way non-state observers actually observe depends on various factors, some of which are more practical (lack of funding capacities) while others relate to respective projects. As PAME is more policy-oriented than other Working groups (Rottem, 2020b: 1), it makes especially sense to participate as an observer that can shape policy outcomes further, such as the IMO with the Polar Code. It should be noted, that marine governance is a policy field that inherently is of global character. Thus, the proactive engagement of observers could be explained through this as well. A comparative analysis of different Working Groups and different policy fields would enhance the understanding of observer roles. Regarding the roles of non-state observers in PAME, the categorization of overachievers and regular visitors (Knecht, 2017a) still apply in many cases, but as this paper has shown, what this can mean can be more specific: Observers can be funders, drivers, advocates, companions, experts and learners. The increasing openness for co-production

of knowledge is an important indicator of mimetic isomorphism and additionally shows the reciprocal nature of the cooperation.

The organizational field of observers to the AC is in constant flux – through expansions and rule amendments, but also through external events and processes. At this moment, observers are not able to participate to their fullest due to the current situation in the AC. Since Working Group meetings have slowly restarted, they do have access to the AC world again. Due to the current state of the AC, observers could evolve into a stronger partner with more influence. If for example, the AC might struggle to create new projects, it might be that Working Groups and Arctic states would look to long-established partnerships with observers to make progress. Non-state observers can build and foster stability through their networks in uncertain times. Alternatively, increased informality in the AC might push observers even further to the outside. Since all decisions are based on consensus, it is fair to assume that no new observers will be admitted, nor will any be ‘kicked out’ in the near future. Consequently, the current crisis might invoke observers to participate less, if there are no repercussions to be feared.

This study has shown that the inter-organizational cooperation between the AC and its observers is not just a myth or a token. To what extent the presence of observers and their respective contributions affect the AC remains unclear and should be the focus of further research. As Knecht suggested, there are different worlds of commitment, but in the case of PAME, some of these commitments appear quite solid and eager to participate in an even more meaningful way. Observing thus, is multifaceted, but being present at meetings is a fundamental part of that.

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