

ARCTIC COUNCIL

The Arctic Council is an intergovernmental forum created in 1996. It includes Canada, Denmark (including Greenland and the Faeroe Islands), Finland, Iceland, Norway, the Russian Federation, Sweden and the United States of America. The Arctic Council is unique in that it includes representatives of indigenous peoples. Six international organizations representing Arctic indigenous peoples have the status of Permanent Participants of the Arctic Council. These organizations are: the Aleut International Association, the Arctic Athabaskan Council, Gwich'in Council International, the Inuit Circumpolar Council, the Russian Association of Indigenous Peoples of the North and the Saami Council. The Arctic Council is devoted to furthering sustainable development in the Arctic region, including economic and social development, improved health conditions and cultural well-being, and to protecting the Arctic environment. The category of Permanent Participant was created to ensure the active participation and full consultation of Arctic indigenous representatives within the Arctic Council.

Denmark, Greenland and the Faroe Islands took over the Arctic Council chairmanship following the Ministerial Meeting in Tromsø, Norway in April 2009 and will pass it on to Sweden at the Ministerial Meeting in Nuuk, Kalallit Nunaat (Greenland) in May 2011.

In its program, the chairmanship has put the Arctic peoples in the fore and has placed special emphasis on health issues, in particular through the Sustainable Development Working Group (SDWG), which is usually chaired by the same country as the Arctic Council. This is in addition to the usual focus on climate change, biodiversity and contaminants.

Strengthening of the Arctic Council

During the Norwegian chairmanship, and now that of Denmark, Greenland and the Faroe Islands, there has been a tremendous increase in global interest in the Arctic and thus also in the Arctic Council. The work the Arctic Council has conducted in the field of climate change has raised global awareness of the challenges facing the region, where the increase in temperature is expected to happen twice as fast as in the rest of the world. There are also expectations that the Arctic Sea ice will change and the ice edge move northwards, which will lead to greater access to parts of the Arctic that were previously inaccessible.

This increased global interest has, among other things, led to more applications for observer status to the Arctic Council, both from non-Arctic states, such as China, the Republic of Korea, Italy and Japan; from international governmental organisations such as the European Commission; and from non-governmental organisations. The Tromsø Declaration, from the Arctic Council Ministerial Meeting of 2009, stated: “Acknowledging the leadership of the Arctic Council on Arctic challenges and opportunities, and the increasing international interest in the work of the council”.

The Arctic Council was on the point of feeling overwhelmed, and serious discussions began as to the role of observers to the Arctic Council. The discussions on observers soon led to a discussion on strengthening the Arctic Council in general.

From an indigenous perspective, there have been concerns regarding the prominent role the indigenous organisations hold within the Arctic Council as Permanent Participants (PP). The unanimous position of the representatives of indigenous peoples' organisations has been that the role of observers must not weaken the role of the PPs. The indigenous representatives have also taken this opportunity to raise the question of how applicants to observer status will treat or work with indigenous peoples. The PPs have been of the opinion that, if the observers do not respect indigenous peoples' rights, they should not be granted observer status to the Arctic Council.¹

Most of the organisational discussions have been conducted in closed sessions, for example, the Arctic Council Senior Arctic Officials (SAO) and Permanent Participants' Heads of Delegation. As interest in the Arctic has increased, and when discussions have touched upon sovereignty and natural resource man-

agement in the Arctic, indigenous peoples' interests have tended to be left out and the Permanent Participants have had to remind states of their position on the Council. With this in mind, there has been concern that the strengthening of the Arctic Council discussions and the interest from observers would weaken the position of the Permanent Participants even more. Fortunately, so far, the experience has been the opposite. In part due to the firm leadership of the chairmanship, the Permanent Participants' position on the Arctic Council has been fully included in the discussions and in the paperwork. It sometimes seems that the status of the Permanent Participants is used to ensure that the observers do not gain too strong a position in the Arctic Council.

Capacity building

The SDWG made serious efforts during 2010 to create effective mechanisms to bring together the requisite expertise to improve its institutional capacity. One example of this was the Arctic Human Health Expert Group (AHHEG). Arctic human health activities were energized during the chairmanship of Denmark, Greenland and the Faroe Islands by the launch of the AHHEG, which provides guidance on circumpolar human health issues and priorities, and has undertaken practical actions to acquire knowledge and to build capacity in the circumpolar region. The circumpolar collaboration is expected to strengthen cooperation on health promotion, disease surveillance and culturally appropriate health care delivery.

The integration of local and traditional knowledge and different areas of cooperation that include indigenous peoples and Arctic communities as respected research partners form a critical link to building knowledge and capacity at the community level. The SDWG/IPY EALAT project demonstrates how the Association of World Reindeer Herders worked with circumpolar indigenous communities using traditional knowledge, science and technology to devise practical approaches on how communities could adapt to the impacts of climate change on reindeer grazing lands.² This is an example of how the Arctic Council can strengthen the capacity of indigenous peoples and Arctic communities. ○

Notes

- 1 An example is documented in the article on Inuit regions in Canada: due to the European Union's ban on the import of sealskin products, Inuit have opposed the EU's attempts to join the Arctic Council as observer.
- 2 More about the Ealat project can be found here: http://icr.arcticportal.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=frontpage&Itemid=78&lang=en

Gunn-Britt Retter has been head of the Saami Council's Arctic and Environmental Unit since 2005. She previously worked as an advisor to the Arctic Council's Indigenous Peoples' Secretariat in Copenhagen and is an active spokesperson on indigenous rights in the Arctic. In 2005, she was elected to the Saami Parliament in Norway and is now in her second term representing the Norwegian Saami Association. Her interests include the role of traditional knowledge in adapting to climate change.