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Arctic Research Centre

Sustainable Development and the Arctic: An Imperative in Search of a Uniting Agenda

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The Arctic Science Summit Week (ASSW) is a conference which is held on a yearly basis, offering a platform for Arctic researchers to present research on pressing issues within the Arctic region. It is organised by the International Arctic Science Committee (IASC), which constitutes a network of different institutions and individuals active in Arctic research, who set the research agenda for the Arctic region. In April 2015, ASSW was held in Toyama, Japan and the St Andrews based Arctic Research Centre (theARC) participated to present its line of research with regards to Energy Justice. The ARC delegation focused their attention to the activities of the Social and Human Working Group.

The setting of the ASSW in Japan's Toyama might seem random at first sight as Japan is neither one of the Arctic states nor close to the polar region. Yet, there is high symbolic character as there is an increasing interest of Japan and other Asian countries in the Arctic for several reasons. Princess Hisako of Takamado, one of the key note speakers points to reasons for this as "retreating ice in the Arctic opens the region to oil and gas exploration, shipping and hunting". Hence, for states like Japan, China, Korea, Singapore – all observer states of the AC - commercial dimensions play a central role for their rising interest in the Arctic. At the same time the Arctic became an almost universal symbol for climate change due to it's vulnerable and changing environment. Thus, interest might also stem form climate change mitigation ambitions these countries might have where "no one country alone will be able to solve the issues but cooperation and collaboration of Arctic science will help to find ways of effective climate change mitigation" (Princess Hisako of Takamado).

IASC

Complementary to the AC which serves as a medium for Arctic and non-Arctic countries and interest groups to cooperate and ideally coordinate their actions within the Arctic, the IASC contributes the scientific research basis for the AC. Scientific research institutions are organised under IASC's 6 working groups (Terrestrial, Marine, Cryosphere, Atmosphere, Social & Human, Cross-cutting). The third International Conference on Arctic Research Planning (ICARP III), which was

part of the ASSW conference, served as the possibility for working groups to revise and retarget their research foci. One general finding was that more coordination of research across working groups has to be achieved. The objectives of ICARP III as presented by David Hik, chair of the IASC, were to:

1) Identify research priorities for the next decade
2) Improve coordination of various research agendas
3) Inform policy makers, people who live in or near the Arctic as well as the general public
4) Build constructive relationships between procedures and users of knowledge

In order to communicate and channel the above goals, intended outcomes of the conference are conference statement (click link) as well as activity summaries and reports, to be published on the IASC Website.

Social & Human Working Group of the IASC

The ARC delegation from St Andrews had a particular focus on the activities of the Social & Human Working Group (SHWG). The latter is looking at the impact of changing natural habitats on indigenous peoples and their way of dealing with the recent developments in the Arctic. In the context of ICARP III also the SHWG redefined its scientific foci aiming at a research agenda to explore the following topics:

1) Arctic residents and change: …sustainability (final formulation pending)
2) Perceptions, representations and histories of the Arctic
3) Securities, governance and law
4) Natural resource(s)/use/exploitation and development: past, present, future
5) Human health and wellbeing

As a result of workshops performed by SHWG members in 2014 there was a call for a greater engagement of northern decision makers in the identification of research

priorities in Arctic areas with a focus on coastal change dynamics and community development. Adding to this, Huigen Yang, Director of the Polar Research Institute of China presented take away lessons from a SWOT analysis performed on their polar research. He found that the focus has to be redirected towards co-production and co-communication or research results between science and stakeholders. Also, next to a better integration of natural and social science in the Arctic, research results need to be presented in a way which is easy to understand for non-scientific audiences.

SD and History

A number of contributions were concerned with the history of the Arctic and more specifically with that of the indigenous peoples. In order to advance in the field of Sustainable Arctic Development, one has to understand historic contexts. Robert Thomsen, Associate Professor at the Aalborg Universitet in Denmark applied the concept of comprehensive sustainability to the Arctic regions of Nunavut and parts of Greenland. “Comprehensive sustainable development is combining the dimensions of ecological, economic, social, cultural, political and legal sustainability which is suitable to cover a range if indigenous peoples with vested interests”. On this basis he found that different indigenous groups significantly alter in their histories, and thus in their present needs as well as their visions for the future. Therefore, it is important that different indigenous groups are considered individually within their contexts rather than all coming from “the Arctic region”.

Adding to this, Tamara Litvinenko described the population dynamics and transformations of human settlements in the Northeast Arctic regions of Russia. She finds that in areas with high proportions of indigenous peoples, rather than outsiders who moved there, there tends to be a focus on more traditional natural resource management based on renewable biological resources (reindeer husbandry, fishing, etc.).

Chris Southcott form Lakehead University (Canada) in turn explored how sustainable development could also be achieved by extracting non-renewable resources, such as oil and gas. At first sight there are many arguments suggesting that sustainability and resource extraction are inherently conflicting due to potential environmental damage, loss of culture, as well as phenomena such as the resource curse or the staples trap . Yet, Southcott developed other arguments where extractive industries can bring new perspectives to local communities, i.e. by improving otherwise poor employment possibilities. This might have positive influences on the local communities where especially male youth have high suicide rates due to a lack of perspective. He found recent technological development to have contributed to better control over extractive resource development with regards to environmental protection and environmental aspects of sustainability. Thus he called for a neutral exploration of attitudes towards extractive industries and to ask the question whether "Arctic communities can use extractive resource development to bring about a sustainable future". Such development can have positive effects on the capturing and management of revenues for Arctic communities, while in another step one has to explore how those industries can be used to increase educational levels and housing conditions.

In this context it might be useful to consider how extractive industries and other activities potentially impact upon the means of governance of indigenous people. Karmul Hossain from the University of Lapland described governance as a means to provide general levels of human security. Revenue streams from commercial activities could potentially benefit the security aspect of "freedom from want" – the provision of an adequate standard of living. Other aspects have to be considered, negative security (protection) as well as positive security (empowerment) and how these might be influenced. In the light of Robert Thomsen described above, Hossain described a threat to security as something which is inherently issue- and region specific and where effective governance has to prioritize threats in order to be able to provide overall security of peoples in their individual contexts.

Arctic Council participation and influence

The Arctic Council is the biggest and arguably most significant platform of intergovernmental Arctic governance worldwide. Tai Ikeshima from Waseda University considers Japan's status in the AC as potentially having mediating and catalyst effects on pan-Arctic cooperation while he sees "Japanese participation in Arctic research as a way of international cooperation rather than competition". Apart from Japan there is a growing number of applications from countries to become observers of the AC, which reflects the importance of the Arctic also to non-Arctic states (Malgorzata Smieszek, IASC Fellow). Critical comments from the audience pointed to very low attendance of delegates from observer countries in AC meetings. This was to suggest that the status as observer might not be a sufficient criteria to reflect engagement and interest within the Arctic, but might merely by a way of strategic positioning in the future.

In addition to the level of participation within the AC, Piotr Graczyk presented his analysis of the effectiveness of the AC. The AC discusses issues within the Arctic and in turn expresses recommendations for policy making to respective governments as it has no legal and binding rights to directly influence governance actions. Graczyk's study about the influence of the AC on Norwegian shipping policies indicated that policy makers were often unaware of the recommendations of the AC or its influence on them. Thus with regards to shipping policies the AC can be seen to have at most limited effects on Norwegian policy making. Generalisations for other policy areas or countries are to be avoided but further investigations are necessary to identify whether there is indeed a lack of communication between the AC and the Arctic State's policy makers or even a reluctance of the latter to accept the AC's recommendations.

Perception and knowledge transfer

Much scientific knowledge and many policy recommendations were presented and discussed at the 2015 ASSW. But as seen in the example of the AC, getting the message and the urgency of actions across might often prove at least as challenging as developing recommendations. Changing climate and, as part of that,

changes in the Arctic are creeping issues not immediately visible and thus often given limited attention by the public. Christopher Rapley, Professor at University College London analysed the comparatively low responsiveness of humans to “slow violence”, such as sea level rise initiated in polar regions, and high responsiveness to “fast violence” which is immediately visible in i.e. terrorist attacks. Human responsiveness is further increased if such violence is happening in proximity. This could be well seen in recent reactions to the terrorist attacks at Charlie Hebdo in Paris, where the death of 12 people mobilised millions in France and across Europe while on going wars with thousands of people killed in more distant parts of the world like the middle east are almost perceived as a side note.

Climate change will arguably be categorised as slow and distant violence and thus the general human mind is not as receptive to it. According to Christopher Rapley “our minds create narratives about everything”. If such narratives affect our emotions we are responding more pronounced. “We need to address emotions of people and tell people a narrative in order to effect a change”. This should make us reflect upon the purpose of science, our targeted audiences and how to get the attention of those audiences relevant to us in order to significantly initiate change.