

# **The Arctic Council: Vision, structure and participation**

Svein Vigeland Rottem





# The Arctic Council: Vision, structure and participation

Svein Vigeland Rottem  
Senior Research Fellow / Programme Director

[svr@fni.no](mailto:svr@fni.no)

March 2016



FRIDTJOF NANSENS INSTITUTT  
FRIDTJOF NANSEN INSTITUTE

**Copyright © Fridtjof Nansen Institute 2016****Title**

The Arctic Council: vision, structure and participation

**Publication Type and Number**

FNI Report 4/2016

**Pages**

13

**Authors**

Svein Vigeland Rottem

**ISBN** 978-82-7613-707-1

**ISSN** 1893-5486

**Abstract**

The last years have seen a widening of the Arctic Council's (AC) agenda as well as an increasing number of participants in its activities. The main question in this paper is what the AC, including the Working Groups (WGs), can do to adapt to these developments. The paper draws on discussions with key persons at the Council and in the Working Groups, and earlier analyses and reviews. In this respect three key points are discussed:

- How to establish a more coherent and clearer vision for work at the Council
- How to strengthen coordination between the bodies of the AC
- How to accommodate and benefit from local, regional, and global stakeholders

Three suggestions are presented in this paper. i) to formulate a comprehensive vision for the Arctic at an Arctic Summit, ii) set up an expert panel to look at the question of coordination and restructuring, and iii) arrange an annual Arctic Week in the capital of the country holding the chairmanship.

**Key Words**

Arctic, Arctic Council, Working Groups

## Introduction

The last years have seen a widening of the Arctic Council's (AC) agenda as well as an increasing number of participants in its activities. The main question in this paper is what the AC, including the Working Groups (WGs), can do to adapt to these developments. The paper does not undertake a critical assessment of a particular working group or member state, but looks at long-standing challenges of varying relevance to each of the WGs and member states. In this respect three key points will be discussed:

- How to establish a more coherent and clearer vision for the work of the Council. The scope of the work undertaken by the Council has widened in recent years, as has the number of projects. This could lead to overlap between the WGs and challenges as to prioritizing within the AC structure.
- How to strengthen coordination between the bodies of the AC. With the increasing workload and broader agenda there is need for a discussion on whether today's WG structure meets the challenges of a "new" Arctic.
- How to accommodate and benefit from local, regional, and global stakeholders. The number of Arctic stakeholders has increased. There is a need to strengthen the venues where key stakeholders work together on Arctic issues in a cooperative and informed manner.

This paper draws on discussions with key persons at the Council and in the WGs. No reference is made to any particular statement by any individual, although a list of interviewees is attached. The paper also includes references to contributions to the literature on the subject. The contents of the paper are the responsibility of the author alone.

## The Arctic Council in Arctic governance

The AC has developed from a forum discussing environmental issues in a remote region into one addressing a wide range of questions with local, regional and global ramifications. The all-encompassing question is how the Council is to find its role in the governance of the Arctic. The WGs have accumulated unique expertise through their regular assessment of the Arctic environment and have discussed measures to respond to the growth in commercial activity in the region. However, the agreements and guidelines created under the umbrella of the AC are limited in scope, mainly because the Arctic littoral states are wary of limitations to their sovereignty. For them it is important to underline that UNCLOS provides the fundamental international legal framework for governance in Arctic waters, as seen in the declaration issued after the meeting in Ilulissat in 2008. Moreover, many Arctic challenges are also global in nature, and can only be addressed in broader international forums. Clearly, the work done in the AC should inform international regulations/agreements, but the AC can only be part of the solution, not *the* solution. Thus, AC's role

in Arctic governance lies at the interface between the international and national frameworks.

The Council will remain to all intents and purposes a decision-shaping body rather than a decision-making one. The Council may still have a decisive impact on Arctic governance in the years ahead, and continue to function as an arena for negotiating international binding agreements. Its value as a forum for consulting and discussing Arctic issues should not be underestimated. The AC is a convenient and appropriate venue where aspects of Arctic policy can be drafted in close consultation with key stakeholders. Of equal importance is its position as a producer of knowledge within the wider patchwork of international bodies whose work affects the Arctic. The activities undertaken under the leadership of the Council help set the Arctic agenda. It is essential to understand the position of the AC in Arctic governance and to bear this in mind when discussing the role and structure of the WGs.

## **Debates on the AC structure**

The WGs have been portrayed as the backbone of the AC and their role and structure have been subject to debate in the AC, consultant studies, and in the scientific literature. At the plenary meeting of Senior Arctic Officials (SAOs) in Anchorage 21–22 October 2015, a joint memorandum of a multilateral audit on the Arctic states' national authorities' work with the AC was presented. The audit was carried out in accordance with a strategic plan signed by the participating Supreme Audit Institutions (SAIs).<sup>1</sup> The work on the multilateral audit was led and coordinated by the Russian Federation and Norway. Key findings were: i) changes in the Arctic have elevated the importance of international cooperation in the Arctic; ii) the AC has contributed to enhanced cooperation, governance, and scientific knowledge; iii) the Council faces challenges related to its organizational structure, establishing priorities, funding of its work, and ensuring effective implementation of voluntary recommendations adopted by member states; iv) indigenous groups make important contributions to the Council, but face challenges participating.

When discussing key challenges, the audit stresses the rise in the number of ongoing projects, from about 30 in 1996 to about 80 currently. The AC has broadened its scope and increased its workload. The multilateral audit underlines the challenges arising from this growing workload in managing and funding the work and ensuring the effectiveness of its recommendations. How the institutional structure may be optimized to improve performance is therefore discussed. Interesting to note, there are very different views concerning the Council's structure and the question of overlapping mandates. Some working group chairs (AMAP, EPPR, SDWG) referred to overlaps as a challenge, others (ACAP, PAME and

---

<sup>1</sup> Only findings by the Multilateral Audit are presented in this paper. It would, of course, be of great interest to compare and analyze all the SAIs, but due to the scope and length of this paper, this is not possible.

CAFF) found the current organizational structure adequate. This diversity in viewpoints is in line with data collected for this paper.

The multilateral audit also found that communication among WGs has improved. WG chairs (and secretaries) meet more often than before for information sharing. The September 2015 Tromsø meeting (involving four of the WGs) and the SAO-Chair-WGs meeting in Reykjavik in December 2015 is evidence of that. Furthermore, the establishment of the permanent secretariat could improve coordination and give support to the WGs. This is especially relevant for ACAP and EPPR, now located in Tromsø. The increasing use of task forces (TFs) to address emerging issues is also discussed. A dilemma is that establishing TFs may take resources from WGs efforts and projects. However, they provide helpful complementary expertise within a set timeframe.

With the approval of Senior Arctic Officials and Ministers, WGs identify their own project priorities. However, the Multilateral Audit underscores the substantial autonomy of the WGs. The development of the *Tracking Tool for Arctic Council Deliverables and Ongoing Work* has improved AC's ability to inventory and track the status of ongoing projects. But the Council lacks the mechanisms to prioritize work across the WGs and TFs. This is connected to the lack of a long-term strategy, complicating channeling experts and economic resources. Given the 80 ongoing projects and ever widening scope and workload, this problem has to be addressed according to the Audit. Furthermore, the lack of reliable funding is a hindrance to the effectiveness of the Council. The *Project Support Instrument* is a relevant tool here. The Multilateral Audit concludes that AC's recommendations are broad and general and therefore difficult to implement as is the tracking of implementation status. The lack of a coherent feedback mechanism at the national level is another weakness.

The Audit thus identifies various problems in the work of the Council. This, however, is a recurrent debate. In 2001, Pekka Haavisto at the Finnish Institute of International Affairs produced a report on the structure of the AC. During the Finnish Chairmanship from 2000 to 2002, the Arctic Chair commissioned a consultancy study for the SAO meeting in Rovaniemi, June 12–13, 2001. The draft consultancy study was discussed at the Rovaniemi meeting. The final report was delivered to the AC secretariat on 29 June 2001, and circulated to member states, PPs, WGs and observers.

In interviews for the present paper, the continuing relevance of the results of the work done in 2001 by Haavisto in close cooperation with the Arctic Council Chair was underlined. The report is ambitious and presents short-term and long-term options for the structure of the AC. Overlaps, gaps, unnecessary competition, financial problems and cost-efficiency issues are discussed. The report looks at the idea of reorganizing the AC and reducing the number of WGs to two: a monitoring group and an implementation group. In this structure an expanded AMAP would act as the overall monitoring and assessment group and implementation activities would be assembled under PAME. The argument against such a comprehensive restructuring was that it

would not take full advantage of the work being done in the WGs already. Personnel resources, networks, data collected, and motivation of individuals and member states should be carefully maintained.

Thus, the structure actually proposed in the Haavisto report is more modest. The proposed structure would consist of four working groups named Brown, Blue, Green, and Rainbow. The Brown group would consist of AMAP and ACAP. The combined AMAP/ACAP would handle all the monitoring functions and ACAP's role would then be to act as an inventory that would provide a prioritized and regularly up-dated list of action projects on pollution. This holistic approach would combine monitoring and implementation. In the Blue group, PAME and EPPR would concentrate on the institutional work on marine pollution. The Green group would be CAFF as the program and action group for living resources and biodiversity conservation. A combination of the monitoring functions of AMAP and CAFF is also discussed in this regard, whereby AMAP would take care of biodiversity monitoring too. In the fourth group – the Rainbow group – SDWG would focus on sustainable development issues.

After additional consultations the SAOs prepared in 2002 a report containing recommendations for improving the structures of the Council, taking into account the review prepared by Haavisto in 2001. In the SAO report to the ministers no change in the WG structure was recommended. However, the need to ensure that all activities of the Arctic promote sustainable development, enhanced dialogue with observers, increased prioritization among project proposals and to more carefully prepare and coordinate the mandates to be given to the WGs was underlined. At the 2002 Ministerial Meeting, at Inari, Finland, the ministers endorsed the SAO report's recommendations.

In 2008, the Norwegian Chairmanship made a contribution to the debate on AC efficiency and presented a report at the SAO meeting in Kautokeino, Norway, 19–20 November 2008. Key themes are funding/resources, priorities/focus, WG coordination/communication, and outreach. Funding is described as a major concern with potential implications for project outcomes. Closely connected to funding is the question of prioritization. One recommendation was to establish long-term goals against which to assess work priorities and another to tie the work program of the AC to an assessment of longer-term needs and goals. For WG coordination and communication prioritization is essential. The value of regular meetings between the SAO Chair and WG chairs is another highlighted point. Finally, the report discusses outreach. One recommendation of particular relevance encourages the AC to strengthen coordination with other institutions and bodies active in the Arctic, including the involvement of observers.

There is also quite a substantial scholarly literature on AC issues. An interesting and important contribution is Paula Kankaanpää and Oran Young's from 2012. The effectiveness of the AC has exceeded the expectations of many, they say. But it is important to investigate what steps could be taken to secure and improve the effectiveness of the AC in the coming years. They prepared a questionnaire on the AC's effective-



ness designed to elicit the views of people familiar with the Council and its work. In their conclusion the good performance in the realm of knowledge generation, issue framing, and agenda setting is stressed. As to adjustments, they make a distinction between internal matters and external issues. On internal matters, their focus is on the configuration of the WGs and the division of labor between them and the TFs. As to external issues, it is vital to engage regional and local constituencies, along with major non-arctic states.

The effectiveness of the AC has thus been the subject of considerable attention at the national, WG, SAO and ministerial levels as well as independent research. And just by looking at the minutes of Ministerial Meetings, SAO meetings, and other AC meetings, we see that the questions of a clearer vision, improved coordination, and increased participation are increasingly debated. One of latest contributions to this debate is the December 2015 Reykjavik meeting of SAOs and WG chairs. Matters discussed there included coordination of WG work plans and scheduling, engagement with Permanent Participants (PPs), integration of traditional and local knowledge (TLK), relations between WGs and TFs and with external bodies. The meeting was described as an important occasion at which to discuss future and reoccurring questions on WG issues.

What this short review reveals is the myriad of different diagnoses of what ails the AC, and possible remedies. Moreover, ways of increasing the effectiveness of the Council are also attracting increased attention. However, it is difficult to find a common ground. At the same time a lot of work has been done of late on strengthening coordination and information sharing among the WGs, both formally and informally. It is obviously necessary to balance what is political feasible and what seems rational from the point of view of any particular affected party, be it a member state, a representative of a WG or a PP.

## **Vision, coordination, and participation**

The major question in this paper is what steps the AC, including its WGs, should take to accommodate the growing range of projects and number of parties with a stake in the Arctic. We present three suggestions, derived from interviews conducted for the purpose of this paper and from earlier analyses and reviews. The focus here is on the WGs, but also on collaboration and cooperation with PPs, observers, SAOs and ministerial level officials.

### **Vision**

Inasmuch as the AC was set up with environmental issues as its primary field of work, some of the respondents argue that the Arctic has changed faster than the adjustments in the various WGs, and that the AC agenda is too broad. Many have highlighted the need for a comprehensive vision of Arctic cooperation. Work on such a vision must be integrated at all levels in the AC, including ministerial, SAO, and WG levels.

One of the main features of Arctic cooperation is the rotating chairmanship. The arrangement has two important effects. First, it gives member states an opportunity to set the agenda for their own chairmanship period and initiate political processes considered of particular importance to the government involved. In extension of this, each member state obtains ownership to the direction the Council should be heading in. It also generates greater interest and involvement of member states. On the other hand, the rotating chairmanship can impair continuity and runs the risk that states without chairmanship will be less inclined to devote themselves to certain political priorities. At worst, the work of the Council will receive less attention because the Arctic agenda is insufficiently incorporated in the relevant ministries and agencies of the member states. Since the AC is not an international organization with the capacity and opportunity to penalize states for not implementing political decisions, this is a challenge that will not go away. The question is how the work of the Council can be given greater legitimacy by the member states, a legitimacy which in turn will foster wider political attention toward the work of AC during periods without a chairmanship boosting interest. Finland's *Arctic Strategy 2013* has a possible remedy: an Arctic summit. It could be held, for example, every four to six years.<sup>2</sup> A summit could formulate a comprehensive vision of the direction the Council should be taking and identify the issues deserving of special attention.<sup>3</sup> Such a mission statement could in turn guide the work of the SAOs and WGs, and increase the pressure on the bodies of the AC to coordinate and focus on activities that harmonize with the overall vision.

The problem with this proposal is, of course, that the political level would probably focus on what is politically opportune at the time of the summit. But it will nevertheless enhance work in specific political priority areas. It could also result in the work of some WGs not getting the desired attention. This does not necessarily mean that important work relating to the Arctic will be forgotten, but that in certain periods the Council will put more political weight on some issue areas. One consequence is that other important Arctic issues of a more regional, national, or local nature will have to be prioritized nationally and that pan-Arctic challenges will be highlighted. This could ensure wider support for an overarching vision and hopefully give all states a sense of ownership to the work of the Council. During the drafting of this overarching strategy, it would make sense to incorporate a larger number of sectoral ministries.

Challenges linked to the involvement of sectoral ministries were also mentioned by our interviewees on several occasions. A closer definition of the Council's work could also improve coordination and, ultimately, implementation of decisions, and here the sectoral ministries could be given a more active role (see also below). The underlying reason behind this recommendation is the Council's growing portfolio. Given the

---

<sup>2</sup> During what we could term the Nordic chairmanship, the Nordic countries did formulate a common strategy.

<sup>3</sup> At the 2013 ministerial meeting in Kiruna, the document "Vision for the Arctic" was presented. The document is broadly formulated and could be criticized for lacking a clear prioritization of the Council's work.

Council's current structure – its small secretariat not least – there is a limit to the number of programs, projects, and fields of activity it can manage without compromising practical implementation and capacity to set the political agenda.

If we apply a similar logic to the WGs, it would be worthwhile to explore, for example, CAFF's strategy: *Actions for Arctic Biodiversity 2013–2021 – Implementing the Recommendations of the Arctic Biodiversity Assessment*. The document spells out an extensive strategy that can be updated and revised every two years. If there are no special reasons to avoid longer-term strategies, the WGs should draft strategies for longer periods. Some of the smaller WGs (such as ACAP and EPPR) might find the strategy rather daunting to begin with. EPPR has nevertheless procedures for updating its strategy every five years via the SAOs. The work of these groups would still probably lie closer to the overall vision. The role of ACAP and EPPR (and for that matter also SDWG) would more likely be as functional units doing the practical work on specific actions. There is insufficient space in this paper to discuss in detail how it should be done, but an obvious example is the role of the EPPR in the implementation of the two binding international agreements negotiated by the member states of the Council.

A clearer vision/strategy for the work done at the Council, both at political and WG levels, would enhance continuity and allow for a more structured and coordinated approach to whatever political issues have been given priority. A suggestion is thus to formulate a comprehensive vision for the Arctic at an Arctic Summit. It is, in other words, a top-down initiative, the focus of which is on substance rather than organization. The political priorities (vision) would still inevitably affect the structure and coordination of the WGs.

### **Structure and coordination**

The establishment of a permanent secretariat in Tromsø gave a boost to the Council's knowledge transfer capacity. It may also make it easier to coordinate the work of the Council's various bodies. The Council has expanded its portfolio and is focusing on numerous projects, some of which cover the same ground in part.

A degree of overlap is not surprising. To take one example, virtually all of the groups have a maritime focus. There is broad awareness of these issues in the Council's work, as can be seen in formal and informal forums for coordinating procedures and potential project overlaps. The Reykjavik meeting of December 2015 exemplifies a forum where the working group secretariats and chairmanship can discuss these issues. On the other hand, opinions are divided as to the scale of the challenge, as the joint memorandum of the multilateral audit on the Arctic states' national authorities' work with the AC shows. It therefore makes sense to ask whether overlapping should lead to a change in the structure of the WGs and a possible reduction in their number. Again, the opinions of our respondents are divided. But three issues received particular attention. First, a recurring issue is the relationship between CAFF and AMAP. In the 2001 critical review by Haavisto of the working group structure, a

merger of these two groups is discussed. The argument in favor is that the groups cover some of the same ground, and having two scientific assessment groups seems somewhat contrived. Nevertheless, the question is whether a merger should be recommended in the present circumstances. A general concern is that reorganization and mergers run the risk of undermining established networks and dampening the motivation of personnel and member states. Furthermore, one feature of the Council's work is that the WGs are divided among the member states. This type of geographical arrangement with, for instance, CAFF based in Iceland and AMAP in Norway, spreads ownership of the work of the Council. A merger would require centralization and pose considerable practical problems. A strong case would have to be made to convince the member states and WGs of the usefulness of merging the two groups, and one could easily argue that CAFF's clear focus on biodiversity stands on its own two feet, and the same could be said of AMAP's work on contaminants. Nonetheless, these areas can clearly not be understood independently of each other, and any reorganization must plainly be based on the substantive challenges, not structural considerations as such.

Second, SDWG attracts repeated attention in interviews and previous evaluations. The question is whether the WGs should all have a clear element of sustainability or whether issues concerning sustainable development in the Arctic should be delegated to a specific group, albeit with strong ties to the AEC. SDWG is different from the others in that its defined focus is on a cross-cutting theme. Anyway, ideas on how SDWG could be integrated with the other WGs or possibly strengthened are in short supply. A recurring claim is that SDWG is too local in its sphere of operations, and that it needs to elevate matters of importance to the entire Arctic population. Relevant fields here are education, health, and demographics in Arctic areas.

Finally, relations between PAME and EPPR were another recurring issue in the interviews. The division of tasks between the PAME and EPPR is unclear. It is particularly in the field of pollution prevention one sees the overlaps. Basically, EPPR is more technical while PAME is more policy oriented. According to interviewees there is room for improvement and a need for further clarification of the groups' respective mandates.

We have also in recent years observed the appearance of several task forces (TF). The creation of task forces gives certain issues heightened attention but some of our respondents were nevertheless worried about potential competition between the TFs and WGs, not least for funding. The practice of creating several TFs and expert groups also expands the portfolio (both structurally and thematically), causing possible coordination problems and project overlap. And recommendations and agreements negotiated within the TFs need to be followed up – by the WGs usually. Again, EPPR is a useful example. The group plays a key role in implementing the 2013 agreement. The question is whether it was necessary to set up a separate TF when EPPR could have been the natural place to draft the agreement. Steps should be taken to move the work of the TFs into the existing WG structure unless there are clear reasons not to.

In a broader, more comprehensive debate on working group mergers, the discussion in the 2001 review and the follow-up by the SAOs is a sensible place to start. The distinction between assessment/monitoring and implementation/follow-up was also mentioned by several interviewees. Any restructuring should anyway be embedded throughout the AC. One suggestion would therefore be to set up an expert panel to look at the question of coordination and restructuring. The balance between the purely scientific functions and implementation functions should be given priority here. A clear mandate is also required.

It would be unwise and premature to issue a clear recommendation regarding the structure of the AC's WGs on the basis of data assembled for the preparation of this paper. It is nevertheless important to identify challenges and propose ways in which they can be overcome. This debate must involve all relevant stakeholders (PPs, SAOs, and WGs). While the discussion could lead to changes in the structure of the WGs, it doesn't have to. It could be argued that earlier restructuring and reorganization proposals were not sufficiently integrated at the SAO, WG, and member state levels. This may explain why these issues keep on appearing on the AC agenda. These debates have, however, led to a clearer awareness of the coordination challenges, something one can see by the action taken to improve collaboration across WGs.

In continuation of the debate on coordination at the Council level, several of our respondents identified national coordination as the main challenge. Here, however, standards differ considerably among the eight member states. Since the challenges facing the individual governments are different, recommendations must be based on studies of each country. Some issues are common to all, however. Procedures enabling the transfer of knowledge when SAOs are replaced should be strengthened; there needs to be a clearer inclusion of sector ministries; national coordination forums need to be set up; and there needs to be a sharper focus on implementation of recommendations and guidelines issued by the AC. Data collected for this paper suggest that all states could make improvements in this respect. This matter will not be discussed further here. However, encouraging the SAO level to take steps to further facilitate national coordination, which in turn will strengthen implementation, would be natural in light of the data collected for this work. The national implementation of the reports from the Supreme Audit Institutions would be a good place to start. By enhancing coordinated participation of relevant stakeholders, it should also be possible at the Council level to improve coordination. This is discussed under the final heading.

## **Participation**

There has been an important discussion in the AC over the past few years on whether to admit a larger number of observers. Questions concerning participation have enjoyed prominence on the agenda. But the participation discussion should not be limited to the new observers allocated a seat at the Kiruna 2013 meeting. Earlier observers and PPs must also be included, along with national sectoral ministries and other regional and international cooperation forums, despite the fact that the

status of the PPs is obviously completely different from that of the observers and other relevant stakeholders.

A recurring challenge at the AC is the frequency of travel and growing number of meetings. Both were mentioned by several interviewees. One remedy could be to arrange one of the two annual SAO meetings in a capital city. This would lower the participation threshold for relevant stakeholders, including observers. In connection with such an SAO meeting, the WGs could conduct workshops on issues of relevance to the agenda. WGs convene in advance of SAO meetings already, but strengthening this practice would allow for further coordination. This should apply both to the design of new projects and running of existing ones. A suggestion is therefore to arrange *an annual "Arctic Week" in the capital of the country holding the chairmanship*. Some may object that the last thing the Arctic needs is another seminar on challenges and opportunities in the region. It is therefore important to emphasize the meeting's function, to support the work of the Council, not simply an opportunity for Arctic networking and brainstorming. The proposal is also based on what kind of role the Council plays in Arctic governance. The primary task of the Council, and in particular the WGs, is to inform relevant national (sector ministries for example) and international decision-making forums (IMO, CBD, Stockholm Convention, etc.). Other relevant regional organizations such as the Barents Euro-Arctic Council, Arctic Coast Guard Forum, etc. could also be involved in this extended meeting. Of course, this will eventually depend on the meeting's agenda. It would arguably make the parties more aware of the Council's role in Arctic governance. It is nevertheless important to maintain a clear footprint in the Arctic region by arranging the majority of the Council's meetings in Arctic areas.

Participation is also closely associated with financing. An obvious example is the Indigenous Peoples' Secretariat fund. In connection to increased participation of observers, indigenous groups could raise further awareness among relevant stakeholders of their central role in the Arctic. A clearer vision in the Council could also attract more political attention and in turn increased funding, cf. first section.

One final point that deserves mention here is the observers' role in the Council, especially in the WGs. There is a general perception that the inclusion of new observers has been successful. But even after the decision in Kiruna in 2013, the observers' role is still rather vague. The guidelines for observers are considered to be too general, and at the October 2015 SAO meeting in Anchorage, Alaska, an amendment to the manual for observers was adopted. But more needs to be done and efforts to coordinate procedures to include observers in WGs should continue. This question was also discussed at the SAO-Chair-WGs meeting in Reykjavik in December 2015. The format for inclusion should be formalized and independent of the priorities of the alternating chairmanships. One alternative would be to look at how this could be made clearer in the AC rules of procedure. Several interviewees stressed the crucial role of the observers, and despite varying participation rates in the WGs, we have seen a positive change, with observers offering ideas on specific issues to the WGs, a change from more general political

attention to the Arctic to a clearer desire to contribute scientific resources to the WGs.

## **Conclusion**

It is important to recognize that the Council is but one element in the governance of the Arctic. States will be the most important actors and UNCLOS the guiding framework. This means that AC will continue in its key role to encourage the generation and acquisition of new knowledge and to formulate and issue recommendations (and in some cases to constitute a framework for negotiating binding international agreements) on developments in the Arctic. An essential question is how best to utilize the knowledge generated within the framework of the Council. Knowledge of the Arctic obtains further value in the practical formulation of policy via implementation and knowledge transfer.

Insofar as the Council does not change its character and gains a stronger international legal status, a major task will still be to take part in relevant political processes at the national and international level. It is on this basis that the issues of vision, structure, coordination, and participation have been discussed here. The proposal to draft a clearer vision for the Council by, for example, creating an Arctic Summit, is based on the comments of several of the interviewees approached for the purpose of this paper.

With regard to structural changes and closer coordination, one of the key findings in this paper is the extreme variation in opinions on the scale of the problem and how it can be resolved. It would therefore be unwise to recommend a specific solution. The interviews conducted for this project reveal the lack of an integrated discussion of the challenges facing the Council and how to tackle them. The Council should therefore appoint an expert panel to discuss and recommend steps to improve coordination, identify overlaps, and propose, if necessary, a reorganization of the structure of the WGs. Respondents were, nevertheless, clear that it is at the national level that coordination presents the greatest difficulties. This was also highlighted in the multilateral audit. It would therefore be prudent to study this work carefully and take necessary action.

The final question in this paper concerned participation. A discussion of participation is closely related to the debate on the Council's position in Arctic governance. Its role today is mainly as a supplier of knowledge, but also as a soft law mechanism in the preparation of guidelines and recommendations. If this work is to be strengthened, it is crucial that operating agencies such as the Arctic Coast Guard, search and rescue agencies, and oil spill services, communicate with the AC and work together. It should therefore be a goal to set up cooperation forums for these services. One recommendation would be to locate a SAO meeting in a capital city and invite relevant organizations to attend and take part in an Arctic Week. This proposal is closely tied to the idea of a clearer vision, but also to the practical challenge of the growing frequency of travel and capacity constraints in Arctic venues. This will obviously be a

challenging process and therefore an argument in favor of strengthening the permanent secretariat.

The proposals presented here can be criticized for being too extensive. They will require, among other things, a general discussion of the Council's priorities in an Arctic shaped by constant change. Nevertheless, in light of the data collected for this study, such a discussion would appear to be a necessary step. Coordination between the WGs, communication between SAO and WG levels, and involvement of relevant stakeholders have been strengthened, but given ever wider participation and an expanding portfolio, additional action should be considered. It is in this context the recommendations presented in this paper should be seen.



## **Interviews**

Tom Barry, Executive Secretary CAFF International Secretariat

Ole Kristian Bjerkemo, The Norwegian Coastal Administration

Else Berit Eikeland, Senior Arctic Official, Norway

Tom Fries, Communications Arctic Council Secretariat

Martin Forsius, AMAP Chair

Susan E. Harper, Director General and Senior Arctic Official, Canada

Elle Merete Omma, Executive Secretary, Arctic Council Indigenous People's Secretariat

Lars Otto Reiersen, Executive Secretary AMAP International Secretariat

Alexander Shestakov, Director WWF Global Arctic Programme

Morten Skovgaard Olsen, Programme Coordinator, Danish Energy Agency

Martin Sommerkorn, Head of Conservation WWF Global Arctic Programme

Nina Buvang Vaaja, Deputy Director Arctic Council Secretariat

Oran Young, Professor – Institutional and International Governance, Environmental Institutions

## **Key readings**

Review of the Arctic Council Structures. Consultant's Study. Pekka Haavisto. 2001

SAOs Report to Ministers on The Review of the Arctic Council Structure. 2002

Improving Effectiveness and Efficiency of the Arctic Council. Norwegian Chairmanship. 2008

The Effectiveness of the Arctic Council. Paula Kankaanpää and Oran R. Young. 2012

Joint Memorandum of a Multilateral Audit on the Arctic states' National Authorities' Work with the Arctic Council. 2015

Summary report. SAO-Chair-WGs meeting Reykjavik, Iceland. 16 December 2015



**The Fridtjof Nansen Institute is a non-profit, independent research institute focusing on international environmental, energy, and resource management. The institute has a multi-disciplinary approach, with main emphasis on political science and international law. It collaborates extensively with other research institutions in Norway and abroad.**



**FRIDTJOF NANSENS INSTITUTT  
FRIDTJOF NANSEN INSTITUTE**

**Fridtjof Nansens vei 17, P.O. Box 326, NO-1326 Lysaker, Norway  
Phone: (47) 67 11 19 00 – Fax: (47) 67 11 19 10 – E-mail: [post@fni.no](mailto:post@fni.no)  
Website: [www.fni.no](http://www.fni.no)**