

Challenges of the Arctic Council's Sustainable Development Working Group: How to Improve?

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Abstract

The Sustainable Development Working Group (SDWG) has main responsibility within the Arctic Council for dealing with the social and economic dimensions of sustainable development. However, since its establishment in 1998, the working group has experienced both confusion and criticism. This report aims to shed light on how the SDWG operates, the challenges it faces, and to recommend ways of improving the working group. The main challenges facing the SDWG concern its mandate, project arrangements and organization. Recommendations include developing a long-term work plan, focusing on projects with broad anchoring among member states, and utilizing the SDWG's expert groups more actively.

Key Words: Sustainable development, Arctic Council, Sustainable Development Working Group

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1 Introduction and Purpose of Report

In 1996 the Arctic Council (AC) emerged from its forerunner, the Arctic Environmental Protection Strategy (AEPS). While subsuming the existing AEPS programmes, the new institution included one other item on its agenda. Influenced by the larger global context, particularly the 1992 UN Conference on Environment and Development, *sustainable development*, together with the AEPS' previous focus on environmental protection, became the two main pillars of the Arctic Council. In line with the expanded agenda, the 1996 'Ottawa Declaration on the Establishment of the Arctic Council' determined to '*adopt terms of reference for, and oversee and coordinate a sustainable development program*' (Ottawa Declaration, 1996, 3). This programme represents the beginning of the Sustainable Development Working Group (SDWG), formally established in 1998, as an addition to the four working groups inherited from AEPS.¹

Today, sustainable development has become an integral element of the work of the Arctic Council and the SDWG plays a leading role in implementing related activities. However, the working group has been surrounded by much confusion and criticism. Despite its potential and relevance, the role of the SDWG, its relation to the Arctic Council structures, and its accomplishments are still difficult to pinpoint, after almost 20 years. Given this contextual starting point, the aims of the present report are threefold: 1) to clarify what the SDWG is and how it operates; 2) to identify the main challenges facing the working group; and 3) to offer recommendations on how to deal with these challenges. As regards the challenges, three core categories are emphasized: mandate, projects and organization. These are discussed in detail, with recommendations grouped accordingly. A key rationale underlying the recommendations is that their implementation must be politically feasible. For that reason they may appear broad in scope. However, this flexibility is intentional, to make possible joint member-state initiatives for improving the SDWG.

In preparing the report, data were collected from the academic literature and the Arctic Council. Additionally, interviews were conducted with key informants connected to the Arctic Council and, more specifically, to the SDWG. These interviews were very helpful, as it proved difficult to gain insights into some issues solely on the basis of available documents. All

¹ The Arctic Monitoring and Assessment Programme (AMAP); the Protection of the Arctic Marine Environment (PAME); the Emergency Prevention, Preparedness and Response (EPPR); and the Conservation of Arctic Flora and Fauna (CAFF). The Arctic Contaminants Action Programme (ACAP) became a permanent working group of the Arctic Council in 2006.

interviewees were guaranteed anonymity. As regard funding, the report was financed under the framework agreement with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, but constitutes an independent piece of research.

2 The Sustainable Development Working Group

2.1 Historical Backdrop

Sustainable development was placed on the Arctic Council agenda by the Sustainable Development Programme, first introduced in the 1996 Ottawa Declaration. However, deciding the content of this programme proved difficult, as considerable confusion surrounded this ‘new-fangled’ but important concept. In an effort to reach a common understanding, the Ottawa Declaration requested the member states to negotiate terms of reference for the Sustainable Development Programme. When finalized in 1998, the goal of the Programme was defined as advancing sustainable development in the Arctic,

including opportunities to protect and enhance the environment and economics, culture and health of indigenous communities and of other inhabitants of the Arctic, as well as to improve the environmental, economic and social conditions of the Arctic communities as a whole. (Terms of Reference for the Sustainable Development Programme, 1998, 1)

At this point, sustainable development became an overarching Arctic Council programme – meaning that all working groups were to include sustainable development as an element in their activities. Still, as might be deduced from the broad formulation cited above, achieving agreement on the comprehensiveness of the programme, or even a list of priorities, remained beyond reach. As an alternative, it was decided that the Sustainable Development Programme should consist of specific projects managed by the Senior Arctic Officials (SAOs), created via a ‘bottom-up’ approach. The Sustainable Development *Working Group* (SDWG) was established, intended to serve as a focal point of discussion for the SAOs and representatives of the Council’s Permanent Participants (PP). Additionally, the SDWG was to facilitate the completion of projects for sustainable development, and propose possible priority areas in the further development of the Sustainable Development Programme.

Upon establishment, the SDWG was equipped with a mandate echoing the formulations of the broad goal expressed in the Sustainable

Development Programme. The guiding tenet running throughout SDWG's work has since been described as pursuing

initiatives that provide practical knowledge and contribute to building the capacity of indigenous peoples and Arctic communities to respond to the challenges and benefits from the opportunities in the Arctic region (sdwg.org).

However, exactly *what* was meant by 'sustainable development' – defined in an unambiguous manner – and how this concept in practice related to the various working groups, including the SDWG, remained rather unclear. A document describing this more specifically – 'The Arctic Council's Sustainable Development Action Plan' – was issued in 2004. This Action Plan operates with three broad categories of sustainable development: 1) the 'economic dimension', encompassing sustainable economic activity, prosperity for Arctic communities, sustainable use of natural resources, development of infrastructure, and information technologies; 2) the 'social dimension', encompassing health, education, cultural heritage, capacity building, gender equality and eradication of poverty; and 3) the 'environmental dimension', encompassing monitoring and assessment of the environment, prevention and elimination of environmental pollution, marine environment protection, and prevention and elimination of ecological emergencies. While the Arctic Council as a whole was to implement measures related to sustainable development, the action plan specifies the SDWG as the expert group on the social and economic dimension. The remaining working groups were given responsibility for following up the environmental dimension of sustainable development. All the same, 'sustainable development' appears to have remained a somewhat diffuse and all-encompassing concept that includes all kinds of issues.

2.2 SDWG's Current Functioning

From the start, the SDWG has been quite different from the other working groups of the Arctic Council. Thematically, it was assigned main responsibility for sustainable development and for the implementation of the Sustainable Development Programme. Since then – in contrast to the other working groups – it has focused on human conditions, relying primarily on the social and economic sciences. The SDWG has been a particularly important mouthpiece for the indigenous peoples in the region, and is often referred to as the 'human face' of the Arctic.

The SDWG also differs from the other working groups in terms of organization. Whereas other working groups are made up of delegates from varying backgrounds – the majority being experts within the activity fields of each specific working group – the SDWG consists of delegates from the foreign ministries of the Arctic states.² In practice that has meant the Senior Arctic Officials or their designated representatives, in addition to representatives from the permanent participants. Some observers, especially the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) and the Association of World Reindeer Herders, have also been active in this working group.

Another distinctive characteristic is that the SDWG Chair rotates in accordance with the Arctic Council chairmanship. A new chair is appointed every second year, and that person is a representative from the country chairing the Council.³ This makes the SDWG chair-positions more politicized than in the case of the other working groups, especially because it enables promoting the interests of the host country, in turn entailing considerable dependency on that particular Arctic state. The remaining SDWG delegates (except those representing the PPs) also alternate relatively often.

As regards administration, the SDWG has a permanent secretariat funded by Canada, located in Ottawa. At present, the secretariat has only one fulltime position – executive secretary – and is thus relatively limited in scope. The SDWG also includes two expert groups: the AHHEG and the SEC. The Arctic Human Health Expert Group (AHHEG) was established in 2009/2010 as a bottom-up initiative, and is an integrated research community, mandated to support communities in developing practical responses to human health impacts. It deals mainly with projects delegated from the SDWG and which fall under the expert group's fields of competence. The Social, Economic, and Cultural Working Group (SEC) was established in 2012, and supports work to advance social, economic and cultural research in the development of sustainable and integrated approaches in the circumpolar region. In contrast to AHHEG,

² The exceptions are Russia, whose delegates come from the Ministry of Economic Development of the Russian Federation, and Canada, whose delegates come from the Department of Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada. See <http://www.sdwg.org/about-us/sdwg-representatives/> for more information.

³ Also the chairs of the other working groups rotate every second year. However, they are not selected (and usually not chaired) by the country hosting the Arctic Council chairmanship – as is the case with the SDWG. The other working groups are chaired by representatives from the remaining Arctic states, selected by the heads of delegation (HoDs) of each working group. In AMAP the chair-position may be extended for a further period of two years. See https://oaarchive.arctic-council.org/bitstream/handle/11374/1805/EDOCS-3793-v3A-ACSAOUS203_Portland_2016_4-1_WG_Common_Operating_Guidelines.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y.

which has been functioning quite well, SEC has not been able to meet during the US Arctic Council chairmanship (2015–2017), and is not yet running optimally. However, several interviewees expressed hope that the expert group will work better under the upcoming Finish Chairmanship.

As to the activities of the SDWG, its mandate is carried out through specific projects approved by the SAOs. To date, many projects have been initiated under the SDWG umbrella, including (but not limited to) topics such as tourism, resource management, health, infrastructure, indigenous cultures, adaptation, gender equality and economy.⁴ Among the best-known projects are the Arctic Human Development Reports (I and II), EcoNor (I, II and III), and EALÁT. The other Arctic Council working groups carry out activities in accordance with a broad programme mandate, generally based on strategic frameworks extending over several years, in addition to work plans. AMAP and CAFF, for instance, have eight-year strategies, using work plans that extend over shorter periods. Also the SDWG has a work plan, but it covers only two years at a time, and the content of the plan is presented in a 3-page document.

Further, although its mandate is carried out through specific projects, the SDWG does not itself undertake those projects directly: it receives and reviews project proposals, which may be authorized, endorsed or designated.⁵ Only *authorized* projects which are circumpolar in scope, with the participation of all member states and permanent participants, and *endorsed* projects, which may be regional in scope and with participation of more than one member state, are recommended by the SDWG and approved by the SAOs. *Designated* projects do not meet the criteria for approval, but could make valuable contributions to the overall work of the Arctic Council. They receive a designation to help in attracting additional support and sponsors. In October 2016 SDWG delegates agreed to eliminate the three-tier system, and develop a

⁴ An overview of all SDWG projects (67) is attached to this report. Projects are grouped according to the social and economic dimensions of sustainable development (although some projects probably fit into both categories), which SDWG is responsible for following up. The presentation is based on a review of 'Reports of SAOs to the Arctic Council Ministers', and the lists of ongoing SDWG-projects included in these reports.

⁵ See Procedures for submitting, approving and managing project proposals in the sustainable development working group, at <http://www.sdwg.org/about-us/sustainable-development-working-group-rules-and-procedures/>.

simplified process for endorsing projects.⁶ At the time of writing, however, this process does not yet seem completed.

Besides its own projects, SDWG contributes to other Arctic Council projects linked to the remaining working groups.⁷ This trend has become clear over the years, entailing a steady increase in the complexity of the SDWG's responsibilities – for instance, the task of providing circumpolar socio-economic and human health statistical data. In line with these growing responsibilities, and in an effort to improve the organization and capacity of the SDWG more generally, some attempts have been made to steer a strategic course and clarify the SDWG's work methods. Such discussions were in evidence before and during the Norwegian chairmanship period (2006–2009), and in 2009 a strategic planning process began. By the end of 2011, the SDWG had completed an internal and external assessment of its operations and effectiveness. A new strategic framework for SDWG, based on a different process initiated in 2016, was later launched in 2017.⁸ However, although the vision of this strategic framework extends until 2030, it is otherwise quite similar to existing SDWG documents, especially in terms of the broad activity scope suggested.

3 Challenges Facing the SDWG: Recurring Criticisms

Since its inception in 1998, the SDWG has been evaluated through Arctic Council initiatives, by governmental agencies, and by scholars. This section summarizes the key criticisms put forth, drawing on past studies and interview accounts collected for this report. For clarity, the criticisms are sorted according to three main categories: mandate, projects and organization.

⁶ For more information see SDWG meeting summary from Orono, Maine, 1–2 October 2016, at <http://www.sdwg.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/SDWG-Chair-Summary-of-Orono-Meeting-01-02-Oct-2016.pdf>.

⁷ Examples of such projects include 'Snow, Water, Ice, and Permafrost in the Arctic' (SWIPA) by AMAP; 'Sustaining Arctic Observing Networks' (SAON) by AMAP; 'Arctic Marine Strategic Plan' (AMSP) by PAME; 'Assessment of Petroleum Hydrocarbons in the Arctic' by AMAP; 'Arctic Climate Impact Assessment' (ACIA) by AMAP; 'Arctic Marine Shipping Assessment (AMSA) by PAME; and 'Circumpolar Local Environmental Observing Network (CLEO) by ACAP.

⁸ In preparing this report, the draft versions of the strategic framework were relied on, including the strategic vision and the implementation plan. The strategic framework was at the time expected to be adopted at the Ministerial meeting in Fairbanks, Alaska in May 2017.

3.1 Mandate

As early as in 2000, Arctic Council Ministers requested the SAOs to consider and recommend ways to improve the structuring of the Council's work. An important objective was streamlining, as well as enhancing synergy and avoiding duplication between the newly established SDWG and the remaining earlier AEPS working groups. In the resulting report, 'Review of the Arctic Council Structures' (2001), the responsible consultant, Pekka Haavisto, particularly noted how suitable placement of 'sustainable development' is problematic, and has been so since the founding of the Arctic Council. As mentioned, the term 'sustainable development' is very broadly defined by the Council; indeed, it may be seen as a 'catch-all-phrase'. This is also the case with the mandates of the Sustainable Development Programme and the SDWG. This in turn makes concretizing the SDWG's work scope and priorities a challenging task.

According to some interviewees, the broad definition of sustainable development, and thus the broad mandate held by SDWG, results in member states themselves deciding its content. At times, this dynamic makes cooperation difficult, as the member states have differing interests – just as they have differing 'Arctics' – and in some cases also interests that conflict with those of the permanent participants (PPs). High-quality projects with support in all member states and PPs are therefore often hard to agree upon, and progress may be slow. In concluding the survey 'The Effectiveness of the Arctic Council' (2012), Paula Kankaanpää and Oran Young note that, at worst, the role and visibility of SDWG work may decrease considerably, unless this challenge can be met and the working group succeeds in finding ways to restrict national interests from overriding common Arctic interests.

In the report 'Office of the Auditor General's Investigation of the authorities' work on the Arctic Council' (2014), the Norwegian Auditor General also notes that the SDWG has a broad and unclear mandate, at times overlapping with mandates of the other working groups. According to that report, one reason for the broad mandate is that the SDWG deals with social science issues that can be very difficult to define – in turn allowing many different problems to be included. By contrast, natural science issues are easier to define, restrict and measure, and thus do not entail the same difficulties.

3.2 Projects

Repeated criticism of the SDWG has concerned its projects, particularly their number and scope, and the arrangements for approving project

proposals. Kankaanpää and Young, as well as the Office of the Norwegian Auditor General, point out that many small projects have been completed since the SDWG was established. However, these projects have often been unrelated and not truly circumpolar.⁹ The lack of circumpolar projects may be viewed in connection with the three-tier system, unique to the SDWG, for evaluating project proposals (see section 2.2).¹⁰ As participation from only two member states is required for approval, projects that are local or national in character are often allowed. When it is already difficult to agree on common interests (due to the SDWG's broad mandate and the uncertainty surrounding the concept of 'sustainable development') and thereby common projects, the three-tier system may further aggravate this challenge. An additional point of criticism regarding the three-tier system concerns the category of 'designated' projects. These are not approved by SDWG and it may be difficult to establish what kind of standard they hold: and yet they are legitimated by the Arctic Council 'brand', and may attract funding from other actors. Several interviewees questioned whether the SDWG uses its time reasonably in this respect.

In a discussion paper on strengthening the SDWG, 'Chair's Discussion Paper: Strengthening the Sustainable Development Working Group' (2016), also the group's chair (2015–2017) has noted how the multi-layered approach makes it difficult to explain and administer the system for approving project proposals. The chair further questioned how the SDWG could ensure the implementation of circumpolar projects and, by extension, how it should handle projects that produce recommendations that may be challenging to some SDWG delegations.

3.3 Organization

Other criticisms regularly put forward have concerned the role of the SAOs and their representatives in the SDWG. According to Haavisto, the SDWG should be independent and separated from the SAOs, reporting to SAOs like the other working groups. This view was echoed by the SAOs in their 2002 report to the Arctic Council ministers on the review of the Arctic Council structures. However, little has been done so far to change the composition of the SDWG – a point on which several interviewees expressed their dissatisfaction. The main challenges linked to the role of

⁹ Although this is not followed up in this study, it appears that ACAP may be facing some of the similar challenges as the SDWG, especially as regards carrying out projects that are not circumpolar in scope.

¹⁰ For an overview of the project approaches of the various working groups, see 'Working Group Common Operating Guidelines' at https://oaarchive.arctic-council.org/bitstream/handle/11374/1805/EDOCS-3793-v3A-ACSAOUS203_Portland_2016_4-1_WG_Common_Operating_Guidelines.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y.

SAOs in the SDWG relate to two matters: the working group's institutional memory, and the lack of knowledge and competence. As mentioned, most SAOs and their designated representatives are officials from the member states' ministries of foreign affairs, and are replaced by new representatives relatively often. Accomplishments and decisions made at one point are not necessarily passed on, resulting in discontinuity. One example illustrating this point is the strategic processes (briefly noted in section 2.2) carried out by the SDWG internally. As pointed out by one interviewee, there is no bridging between these processes. Each one starts from scratch, without taking prior work into account. Other interviewees closely involved with the SDWG were not familiar with these past processes at all, nor with SDWG's history and the Sustainable Development Programme on which the working group is based. One interviewee maintained that few new representatives have been informed about SDWG institutional arrangements, and therefore need time (which they do not always have, due to other work commitments) to familiarize themselves. Such shortcomings affect SDWG management and operation by reducing efficiency and impeding progress.

Additionally, representatives from the member states' foreign ministries are not necessarily experts within the broad thematic fields handled by the SDWG. Thus, they do not always possess the expertise needed to evaluate project proposals or the accomplishments of completed projects. Another concern raised by some interviewees is the tendency among some foreign ministry delegates to prioritize diplomatic craftsmanship, at times putting issues of sustainable development in second place.

As to the SDWG administration, there has been criticism of the limited secretariat support. As noted by SAOs in 2002, this was considered insufficient already then, and the need to strengthen such services was viewed as a matter of urgency. Since then, Canada has given support by making the SDWG secretariat permanent and providing funding. However, the SDWG secretariat still has only one fulltime position, so its capacity remains limited. According to one interviewee, this is particularly evident when it comes to communication, outreach and SDWG's official website.

4 How can the SDWG Improve?

Having identified the main challenges, this section presents a set of suggested recommendations aimed at improving the SDWG. In formulating the following recommendations, two objectives were

particularly important: to accommodate the criticisms noted above, and to find suggestions that would not require overly great changes in existing structures and functioning, but could build on the current foundations. In that way SDWG's potential may be realized without having to make drastic, all-encompassing changes.

4.1 Recommendation on SDWG's Mandate

First and foremost: a shared understanding of what 'sustainable development' and the SDWG's mandate includes is essential. As of today, sustainable development, within the SDWG/Arctic Council framework, is taken to encompass everything from industrial and commercial development, economy and adaptation, to health issues, social challenges and indigenous peoples' cultures. Naturally, this also applies to the SDWG mandate. Despite a very broad thematic span, it is not necessarily so that this mandate must be drastically changed. It must, however, be restricted somewhat.

One way of restricting SDWG's mandate is to introduce long-term work programmes extending over several years – at least five. Within the limits of a work programme, a smaller number of narrower focus areas can be defined for that given period. Similarly, when a new work programme is being prepared, other focus areas can be chosen as priorities. With such an arrangement, the thematic span of SDWG's mandate can be retained, but restricted to a fixed number of years. Furthermore, a long-term work programme fosters continuity – particularly desirable as regards the frequent replacements of SAOs and other SDWG delegates, as well as the SDWG chair (more on this below, see section 4.3).

That said, it is certainly advantageous to focus on those themes/challenges that are common to member states and permanent participants, where national interests are not in conflict. The SDWG has become known for its focus on human aspects and social challenges in the Arctic, and it is probably wise to concentrate attention on issues of that kind. The human aspect is an important niche that distinguishes the SDWG thematically from the other working groups. Moreover, the SDWG's focus on people living in the Arctic, represents a significant element in the work of the Arctic Council.

Likewise, Haavisto suggests that the SDWG should prioritize social, health and educational issues, where there is more need for Arctic cooperation. He adds that sustainable use of natural resources, the legal status of indigenous peoples, traffic problems and environmental threats also are important, but that trying to deal with those issues would be counterproductive, as the various Arctic governments differ greatly in their positions. Moreover, some of these issues are in part dealt with by other working groups. Our interviewees expressed similar views. Most

interviewees felt that the SDWG should focus on knowledge production, for instance in the form of statistics that can be put to use in public planning. Many also emphasized the great societal challenges in the Arctic. Important themes – that may be used as focus areas in the work programmes discussed above – are gender equality, education, health, mental illness and crime. Other important issues in need of attention are sexual abuse and drug abuse. However, finding common ground across member states and permanent participants might prove difficult within the SDWG framework.

The exact role of economic and industrial/business development, on the other hand, is more difficult to determine. Several interviewees noted that, due to the varying levels of development in Arctic areas, member states differ in their interests, providing a narrow base for cooperation on such issues. Ultimately, this may indicate that economic and industrial issues should be addressed elsewhere, for instance the Arctic Economic Council. After all, other appropriate arenas for discussing sustainable development (generally and more narrowly defined) also exist.

However, further development and adaptation of industry, particularly on the part of indigenous communities, is important and relevant to the human aspect of sustainable development. Industrial development is closely linked to social development and societal challenges. Removing these facets altogether from the SDWG mandate is not likely to be well-received – at least, not among the permanent participants. An advantage of introducing long-term work programmes in this regard is the continuous possibility of defining certain specific focus areas, including some economic and industrial issues, for a given period. However, if the SDWG is to deal with economics, this should be limited to analysis of economic conditions in a general sense and, perhaps, indigenous peoples' industries such as reindeer herding. Market development and business partnership may be better addressed in other forums.

Based on the above reasoning, the following is recommended:

- *Introduce long-term work programmes that restrict the SDWG's mandate to given periods. For each work programme, define certain specific focus areas as priorities over the next years. Selection of such focus areas should be based on circumpolar issues that are common to all parties, especially societal challenges, although some economic issues may also be addressed.*

4.2 Recommendation on SDWG Project Arrangements

If the prior recommendation is followed up – that is, if the SDWG can limit its mandate to given periods – subsequent positive effects on project arrangements are likely to unfold. By implementing long-term work programmes that specify focus areas over a certain number of years, the SDWG will have to approve projects that clearly fall within the scope of those focus areas. Consequently, both the number of projects and the thematic span should be reduced. Fewer and more concentrated projects may, in turn, lead to broader anchoring among member states, potentially mobilizing greater financial and human resources. Overall, this may improve the quality of projects, their visibility and, possibly, their impact. However, several additional and more concrete measures may help this process along.

As long as the SDWG continues to be a project-based working group, well-functioning systems are needed: to approve project proposals, to ensure high quality of outputs (reports/assessments/etc.), and later evaluation of accomplished projects. As regards approving project proposals, the current complex tier system should be replaced. After all, not even interviewees working with projects in the SDWG could correctly explain how this system *actually* works. A possible solution is to eliminate the three existing project categories – authorized, endorsed and designated – and operate with only one. An important criterion for approval should be participation from several member states – for instance, a minimum of four, as well as the permanent participants. Project proposals should preferably be circumpolar. Moreover, proposals should be considered by experts, not SAOs or their designated representatives alone. Outsourcing such evaluation to the two existing expert groups, or to additional new expert groups with other narrow thematic scopes (more on this below, see section 4.3), might prove advantageous.

In ensuring high-quality outputs, those projects that result in reports or assessments could be peer-reviewed, as practised in other working groups (e.g. AMAP and CAFF). Confidence in the SDWG may then increase, as may the impact of its projects (/outputs). Finally, accomplished projects should be evaluated in order to determine the results achieved, what worked and what did not. That can help the SDWG to amass valuable experience which can feed into later projects. In addition to reviewing projects internally, such post-evaluation may include examination of how often projects/reports/assessments are referred to by others.

On a more general note, interviewees pointed out that the projects considered most successful were those that produced new and much-needed knowledge – as well as statistics, e.g. EcoNor (I, II and III),

Arctic Social Indicators (I and II), and the Arctic Human Development Reports (I and II). Statistics provide important information for other working groups as well. If the number of its projects decreases, the SDWG may be able to focus on and follow up such demand within the Arctic Council better.

Based on the above reasoning, the following is recommended:

- *End the current three-tier system for approving project proposals, and operate instead with one category, requiring accepted project proposals to be anchored in at least four member states as well as permanent participants. To ensure the quality of project outputs, reports and assessments it may be advantageous to have them peer-reviewed before publication, and evaluated afterwards.*

4.3 Recommendation on SDWG Organization

A recurring criticism concerning SDWG organization is the role of SAOs and their delegates. Earlier studies as well as data from our interviews indicate that their representation in the SDWG reduces institutional memory and it also argued that they lack expertise. Several interviewees suggested that they should be removed from their current position in SDWG. However, such a change would be drastic and, considering how the SAOs and their delegates are anchored at a high political level – the ministries of foreign affairs – rather unlikely. Moreover, SAOs' connection to the SDWG is not totally negative. In fact, as some have pointed out, SAOs' linkage to national ministries of foreign affairs signals that sustainable development, as well as issues concerning residents of the Arctic, are highly important – nationally and within the Arctic Council.

However, some measures must be taken if the current situation is to improve. As regards countering the perceived lack of expertise, the two expert groups should be utilized more actively. Here the most important thing is to ensure that expert group delegates have the knowledge necessary to achieve the goals and follow up the priorities defined by the SDWG. If work programmes – as argued above – are implemented, such delegates may be selected in connection with the inception of a new programme, and in line with the goals and focus areas defined for that next period. As a supplement to the two current existing expert groups, AHHEG and SEC, more expert groups with narrow fields of expertise may be established. In that way, those corresponding to the current prioritized focus areas could be in operation, whereas those that do not could be 'paused' until their expertise is again requested.

By relying more extensively on the expert groups, as well as on work programmes, institutional memory may also be improved. Although SAOs and their designated representatives continue to alternate frequently, priorities and objectives will not shift accordingly. As a result, better continuity can be achieved and it will be easier for new delegates to familiarize themselves with the SDWG current activities and applications.

Finally, concerning the SDWG secretariat, one solution could be to strengthen its current operations, by expanding it with one additional position. If lack of funding makes this impossible, an alternative might be to make more use of the Arctic Council Secretariat. For instance, communication and information work, particularly outreach and web design as well as keeping track of SDWG's project portfolio, could be delegated to the secretariat in Tromsø. That secretariat could also assist the SDWG by coordinating the Arctic Council's work on sustainable development – including the work done by other working groups – so as to avoid overlaps and duplication, and make it easier to identify opportunities for cooperation.

Based on the above reasoning, the following is recommended:

- *Strengthen and utilize existing expert groups more actively. As a supplement, create new thematically based expert groups, in addition to the existing ones, whose expertise can be used when necessary, and 'paused' when redundant. Support from the Arctic Council Secretariat in Tromsø may be sought in coordination, information and communication work, especially if the SDWG is not able to expand its own permanent secretariat.*

5 Summary and Way Forward

Taking into consideration the criticism and confusion surrounding the Sustainable Development Working Group (SDWG) of the Arctic Council, this report has sought to explain how the working group operates and the challenges facing it. Drawing on the insights gained from this process, three key recommendations related to the SDWG's mandate, project-arrangements and organization have been put forth. There can be little doubt that the SDWG has relevant contributions to make within the structure and scope of the Arctic Council. Likewise, however, the SDWG clearly has great potential for improvement. Thus, the question of the SDWG's future has become a recurrent puzzle. Three possible directions here – depending on the extent to which the above recommendations are followed up – have been assessed.

One way forward would be to terminate the working group entirely. After all, all Arctic Council working groups include some element of sustainable development, so such work could continue, albeit to a lesser extent, without one specific working group dedicated to the topic. However, the SDWG's mandate is the only one to encompass the *human aspect* of sustainable development. Complete termination of the working group might lessen the influence of indigenous peoples, through the permanent participants, because an important arena for furthering their interests in the Arctic region would disappear. Moreover, many important Arctic challenges would simply not be addressed.

Another approach would be to preserve the SDWG as it is today. Even though the SDWG faces relatively extensive challenges, this alternative may be the most probable direction for SDWG. After all, changing well-established structures has a cost and, most importantly, requires political will. As regards both the SDWG and the Arctic Council generally, it seems questionable whether such will is present and, if so, solid enough.

A third and final scenario involves following through some of the recommendations outlined above, with the SDWG undergoing certain changes. This is, in the authors' opinion, the preferable outcome: it will allow some of the SDWG's potential to be realized, resulting in more concrete and valuable contributions. That being said, the current problems extend beyond the SDWG as such, and are partly a by-product of the Arctic Council's broad definition of sustainable development, as well as its structure. Much of the responsibility for implementing the sustainable development pillar has fallen on the SDWG – one single working group. Further, although all working groups involve an element of sustainable development, their contributions lack coordination. The challenges facing SDWG are in part indicative of the challenges facing the Arctic Council more broadly, especially concerning organization and distribution of responsibility. How to deal with these issues, however, lies beyond the scope of this study.

Annex 1. Key Readings

Arctic Council (2002): 'SAOs Report to Ministers on the Review of the Arctic Council Structures'.

Arctic Council (2004): 'The Arctic Council's Sustainable Development Action Plan'.

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Kankaanpää, Paula and Oran R. Young (2012): 'The Effectiveness of the Arctic Council', *Polar Research* 31/1.

Norwegian Chairmanship (2008): 'Improving Effectiveness and Efficiency of the Arctic Council'.

Office of the Auditor General of Norway (2014–2015): 'Office of the Auditor General's Investigation of the Authorities' Work on the Arctic Council'.

SDWG (2009): 'Report on the Sustainable Development Working Group to Senior Arctic Officials'.

SDWG (2016): 'Chair's Discussion Paper: Strengthening the Sustainable Development Working Group'.

Annex 2. SDWG Initiatives and Projects, 1998–2016

Initiatives and Projects			
Number	Start–end/lead(s)	Social	Economic
1	1998–2004 /Canada	The Future of Children and Youth	
2	1998/USA/ Finland		Cultural and Ecotourism
3	2000–2008/USA	International Circumpolar Surveillance: Prevention and Control of Emerging Infectious Diseases in the Arctic/ICS	
4	2000–2002/Norway		Sustainable Reindeer Husbandry
5	2000–2002/ Finland		Sustainable Development in Northern Timberline Forests
6	2000–2006/ USA/ Northern Forum		Arctic transportation and circumpolar infrastructure (CITF)
7	2000–2006/Denmark: Greenland	Survey of Living Conditions in the Arctic /SLICA	
8	2000/USA	Arctic Telemedicine, phase I	
9	2002/USA		Arctic Infrastructure: Aviation Report
10	2002–2004/Saami Council /Norway		Co-Management of Marine Resources in Arctic Areas with Respect to Indigenous Peoples' Traditional Ecological

			Knowledge
11	2002–2004/Iceland	Arctic Human Development Report (AHDR)	
12	2002–2005/Finland		Product Development and Processing in Sustainable Reindeer Husbandry
13	2002–2006/Finland		Sustainable Model for Arctic Regional Tourism (SMART) (based on the Cultural and Ecotourism project from 1998)
14	2003/Iceland		Information and Communication Technology in the Arctic – International Conference
15	2003–2004/Norway	Women's Participation in Decision-making Processes in Arctic Fisheries Resource Management	
16	2003–2004/Norway		Family-based Reindeer Economy, and the Status and Management of Wild Reindeer/Caribou Populations
17	2004–2008/USA	Telemedicine, phase II	
18	2004–2006/Norway		Economy of the North: Impacts and Effects of Climate Change (ECONOR I)
19	2004–2006/Norway	Women and Natural Resource Management in the Rural North	
20	2004/Canada	Capacity Building:	

		Overview of the Arctic Council	
21	2004/US		Arctic Marine Transport Workshop
22	2005/Canada	Analysis of Arctic Children & Youth Health Indicators	
23	2006–2010/RAIPON		Sustainable Development of Indigenous Peoples of Russian North
24	2006–2008/Russia	Research & Action Plan for Human Health Risk Reduction in the Arctic	
25	2006–2007/ Canada	Arctic Indigenous Languages Symposium	
26	2006–2010/Iceland	Arctic Social Indicators	
27	2006–2009		SDWG Report on Arctic Energy
28	2006–2007/Sweden		Arctic Action (ICT)
29	2006–2009/Norway	EALAT-Information: Reindeer herding, traditional knowledge and adaptation to climate change and loss of grazing land	
30	2006–2008/US		Arctic ICT Assessment
31	2006/Canada	ArcticStat	
32	2007/USA		Arctic Energy Summit
33	2007–2009/USA	Arctic Human Health Initiative (AHHI)	
34	2007–2009/Norway	Vulnerability and Adaptation to Climate Change	

		in the Arctic (VACCA)	
35	2007–2009/USA	Advancing Alcohol & Drug Abuse Treatment in the Circumpolar North	
36	2008–2009/Canada	Circumpolar Information Tool Kit on Minerals, and Oils and Gas for Indigenous People and Northern Communities	
37	2009/Denmark/Canada	Hope and Resilience in Suicide Prevention Seminar	
38	2009–2011/Canada/Denmark	Circumpolar Health Observatory	
39	2009–2011/Canada/Denmark	Circumpolar Nutrition Guide	
40	2009/Norway	ECONOR II	
41	2010–2013/Norway	Assessment of Cultural Heritage Monuments and Sites in the Arctic	
42	2011/Canada	Circumpolar Information Guide on Mining for Indigenous Peoples & Northern Communities	
43	2011–2015/Iceland/Canada/Denmark	Arctic Human Development (II)	
44	2011–2015/Russia/Norway/Saami Council	EALLIN - Reindeer Herding and Youth	
45	2011–currently on hold/Russia/Norway	Electronic Memory of the Arctic (EMA)	
46	2011–2012/USA, Iceland		Arctic Marine Aviation Transportation Infrastructure

			Initiative (AMATII)
47	2011–2013/Sweden		Corporate Social Responsibility and Sustainable Business in the Arctic
48	2011–2013/Iceland	Arctic Social Indicators, ASI-II	
49	2011–current (on hold)/ICC/ Canada/ Denmark/ US	Assessing, Monitoring and Promoting Arctic Indigenous Languages	
50	2011–2015/US/ Canada/ Denmark/ ICC	A Circumpolar-wide Inuit Response to the AMSA	
51	2012/Canada/ Denmark	Comparative Review of Circumpolar Health System Report	
52	2012–2013/Canada	Adaptation Actions for a Changing Arctic, <i>part a</i>	
53	2013–2015/SDWG	Food and Water Security Indicators in an Arctic Health Context	
54	2013–2015/Canada/ Denmark/ Norway/ Russia/ USA/ ICC	The Evidence-base for Promoting Mental Wellness in Northern Circumpolar Communities	
55	2013–2015/Canada/ USA/ AIA/ GCI	Arctic Adaptation Exchange: Facilitating Adaptation to Climate Change	
56	2013–2015/ Iceland/ Finland/ Denmark/ Norway/ AIA	Gender Equality in the Arctic: Current Realities and Future Challenges	

57	2013–2015/ Canada/ Denmark/ ICC	Review of Cancer Among Circumpolar Indigenous Peoples	
58	2013–2016 /Norway/ USA/ Canada/ Saami Council		Economy of the North 2015 (ECONOR III)
59	2014–2015/Canada/ Denmark/ USA/ AIA/ GCI	Traditional and Local Knowledge	
60	2014–2017 (current)/Canada/ Norway/ USA/ Saami Council/ Denmark/Russia/AIA		EALLU: Arctic Indigenous Youth, Climate change and Food Culture
61	2015/US/ Iceland		Arctic Energy Summit
62	2015–2016/Canada/ USA/ Finland/ Iceland/ GCI		Arctic Remote Energy Networks Academy (ARENA)
63	2015– 2017(current)/USA, Canada/ Norway/ Denmark/ICC	Reducing the Incidence of Suicide in Indigenous Groups – Strength United Through Networks (RISING-SUN)	
64	2015–2017 (current)/USA, Denmark	Improving Health Through Safe and Affordable Access to Household Running Water and Sewer Services (WASH)	
65	2015–2017 (current)/USA/ Canada	Operationalizing One Health in the Arctic	
66	2015–2017/Norway		The Arctic as a Food-Producing Region
67	2016–2017/USA		Arctic Renewable Energy Atlas

*It has been challenging to get a detailed overview of all SDWG-projects as well as the correct time periods for implementation. The list may, therefore, include some errors and/or time-lags. Projects beyond those

presented here may also have been completed between 1998 and 2016. Regardless, the number of projects listed above is much more extensive than the number suggested by the Norwegian Auditor General in 2014, which was about 30. This in itself is indicative of several of the challenges put forth earlier in the report.

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