Together towards a sustainable Arctic

The theme of the Arctic Council Chairmanship program for 2019-2021 reflects Iceland’s commitment to the principle of sustainable development and refers to the necessity of close cooperation between the states and peoples of the region and beyond.

With sustainable development as an overarching theme, Iceland highlighted four priorities:

- The Arctic Marine Environment
- Climate and Green Energy Solutions
- People and Communities of the Arctic
- A Stronger Arctic Council

Some of the key accomplishments of the Arctic Council under these priorities are outlined in this factsheet.

QUICK FACTS

CURRENT CHAIRMANSHIP TERM
May 2019 – May 2021

PREVIOUS CHAIRMANSHIP TERM
October 2002 – November 2004

CHAIR OF THE ARCTIC COUNCIL
Guðlaugur Þór Þórðarson, Minister for Foreign Affairs and Development Cooperation

CHAIR OF THE SENIOR ARCTIC OFFICIALS
Ambassador Einar Gunnarsson

CONTEXT
The Chairmanship of the Arctic Council rotates every two years among the eight Arctic States. The first country to chair the Arctic Council was Canada (1996-1998), followed by the United States, Finland, Iceland, the Russian Federation, Norway, the Kingdom of Denmark, and Sweden. The second cycle of Chairmanships began in 2013. Iceland chaired the Arctic Council from 2019 to 2021.
THE ARCTIC MARINE ENVIRONMENT

The Arctic is largely covered by ocean and many Arctic communities rely on ocean-based activities. The Arctic States therefore have a duty to safeguard the Arctic marine environment for a sustainable future in the region. Surrounded by the ocean, the Arctic marine environment was a natural priority for Iceland. During its Chairmanship, Iceland highlighted the issue of plastic pollution in the Arctic marine environment, promoted innovative methods to improve the utilization of living marine resources, fostered marine cooperation, and continued to promote safe and sustainable shipping in the Arctic.
AN INTERNATIONAL SYMPOSIUM ON PLASTICS IN THE ARCTIC

Amongst the efforts Iceland initiated to tackle the issue of marine litter, was an international symposium on plastics in the Arctic. The “International Symposium on Plastics in the Arctic and Sub-Arctic Region” was held online in March 2021 and co-hosted by the Government of Iceland and the Nordic Council of Ministers in collaboration with 11 partners. Originally scheduled to take place in-person in Reykjavik in April 2020, the event was delayed and moved online due to the pandemic. The symposium gathered the best available scientific knowledge on marine plastics in the Arctic – presenting close to 100 scientific studies – as well as invited experts to discuss best practices to deal with the issue. The event shed light on important sources of plastic pollution, impacts of the pollution in the Arctic, and the importance of regular, harmonized monitoring and international collaboration to increase overall knowledge on the issue. One of the main messages from the Symposium was the urgency for Arctic States and others to take action to reduce plastic pollution.

SAFE AND SUSTAINABLE SHIPPING

During the Icelandic Chairmanship, the Council’s Working Groups on Emergency Prevention, Preparedness and Response and the Protection of the Arctic Marine Environment further strengthened the knowledgebase on shipping in the Arctic and worked on enhancing emergency responses in Arctic waters. Arctic shipping reports assessed changes in Arctic ship traffic and use of heavy fuel oil, and reported on the Arctic Shipping Best Practice Information Forum. And the Guidelines for Arctic Marine Risk Assessment were launched, a web-tool for conducting Arctic marine risk assessments.

BLUE BIOECONOMY

Iceland initiated a project on blue bioeconomy with the objective to explore opportunities and challenges for the development of the blue bioeconomy in the Arctic. The blue bioeconomy includes all kinds of economic activities but is based on intelligent and sustainable use of bioresources, focusing on improving utilisation, innovation and creating higher-value products. The project focused on balance between economic growth, social inclusion and environmental protection. The outcome is a desktop study that presents the current state of various blue bioeconomy sectors (marine fisheries, aquaculture, algal biomass, and freshwater fishing) in four Arctic regions: Iceland, Norway, Northern Canada, and Alaska.

NEW MARINE COOPERATION INITIATIVE

The Senior Arctic Officials’ Marine Mechanism (SMM) was launched during Iceland’s Chairmanship term. The SMM offers a venue for the Senior Arctic Officials and the Council’s marine experts to discuss issues regarding the Arctic marine ecosystem and coastal communities in the circumpolar North. The objective is to ensure that senior marine managers are involved in the dialogue on Arctic marine stewardship. The creation of the SMM was first recommended by the Council’s Task Force on Arctic Marine Cooperation and endorsed at the Ministerial meeting in Ro-vaniemi, Finland in 2019.

REGIONAL ACTION PLAN ON MARINE LITTER IN THE ARCTIC

During the Icelandic Chairmanship, the Arctic Council developed a Regional Action Plan to reduce marine litter, including micro-plastics, along with other efforts to monitor and limit its impacts. The plan includes 59 strategic actions in 8 thematic areas outlining opportunities to reduce marine litter in sectors such as fisheries, shipping, aquaculture, and waste-water management.

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During the Icelandic Chairmanship, the Arctic Council continued observing and assessing climate impacts on Arctic marine, freshwater and terrestrial ecosystems. The Council also built on the work of its Expert Group on Black Carbon and Methane, to identify opportunities to reduce emissions of short-lived climate pollutants. Over the past two years, the Council has further encouraged the development and application of practical green energy solutions in the Arctic region, to enable communities to reduce emissions and improve air quality.
UNDERSTANDING CLIMATE CHANGE

During the Icelandic Chairmanship, the Arctic Monitoring and Assessment Programme (AMAP) worked on advancing knowledge of climate change in the Arctic. AMAP will amongst other publications release an Arctic Climate Change Update 2021, which includes key trends and impacts, summarized for policymakers. The Working Group on Conservation of Arctic Flora and Fauna (CAFF) in turn analyzed the effects of climate change on terrestrial biodiversity and will release the State of Arctic Terrestrial Biodiversity report in May 2021.

TACKLING POLLUTANTS

Under Iceland’s lead, the Council’s Expert Group on Black Carbon and Methane (EGBCM) will release its third Summary of Progress and Recommendations Report, based on the national reports and other relevant information, in May 2021. In the report, the Arctic States reaffirm their commitment to “enhanced, ambitious, national and collective action to accelerate the decline in our overall black carbon emissions and to significantly reduce our overall methane emissions.” Pollutants were also addressed by the Arctic Contaminants Action Program (ACAP), which amongst other topics worked on the mitigation of short-lived climate pollutants from associated petroleum gas (APG) flaring.

GREEN ENERGY KNOW-HOW

Under Iceland’s leadership of the Council’s Sustainable Development Working Group (SDWG), the “Zero Arctic” project developed concepts for carbon neutral constructions in the Arctic. By drawing on both expertise from scientific assessments and traditional knowledge, the international project team worked on solutions that can lessen the energy consumption, greenhouse gas emissions and resource use of future buildings. SDWG also continued its work on other green energy related projects, such as the Arctic Renewable Energy Atlas and the Arctic Renewable Energy Networks Academy.

ALL ABOARD! TACKLING POLAR OCEAN ACIDIFICATION

The Arctic is experiencing some of the fastest rates of ocean acidification with potentially severe implications for the ecosystem and communities dependent on these. To raise awareness of acidifying waters and to bring state-of-the-art knowledge on the issue to a global arena, the Arctic Council under the leadership of the Icelandic Chairmanship organized a side event “All aboard! Tackling polar ocean acidification” at the COP25 in Madrid. The event brought together leading international acidification experts for a briefing on the chemical, biological, and socio-economic impacts of acidifying waters in the North – and what can be done to tackle the issue.
The biggest difference between the Arctic and the Antarctic is that roughly four million people live in the Arctic. It is therefore not surprising that Iceland placed an emphasis on initiatives that aim to promote the wellbeing of Arctic inhabitants. As northern communities already face challenges resulting from the impacts of climate change, the Icelandic Chairmanship promoted actions to strengthen resilience and facilitate adaptation. It also looked at new economic opportunities that can contribute to growth and prosperity of Arctic communities. And as an important element for achieving sustainable development, Iceland further strengthened the Council’s work on gender equality.
ARCTIC RESILIENCE

Iceland hosted the second Arctic Resilience Forum online. The virtual conference laid a strong foundation for continued collaboration and conversation on Arctic resilience. With communities as the launch point and recognizing that issues are interconnected, the Council can build a network that engages diverse experts and knowledge holders to continue discussions and integrate the ideas and perspectives from this community into activities and initiatives that strengthen and advance Arctic resilience.

COVID-19 IN THE ARCTIC

In order to enable Arctic States and Permanent Participants to assess the effects of the global Covid-19 pandemic in the Arctic, Iceland initiated the preparation of a briefing document for Senior Arctic Officials (SAOs). The aim was to gather the most up-to-date information on how the health crisis impacted Arctic communities and economies. Within five weeks, a team of more than 50 experts from across the Arctic compiled a briefing document for SAOs – which has since guided the Council's work regarding the pandemic.

GENDER EQUALITY

Iceland continued to lead the Gender Equality in the Arctic (GEA) project that aims to promote dialogue on gender equality in the Arctic and to strengthen a network of experts and stakeholders in the field. A major component of Phase III of GEA was to develop a report on gender-related issues in the Arctic and contribute to filling the knowledge gaps on this subject in the region.

YOUTH ENGAGEMENT

Youth engagement has been gaining momentum in the Arctic Council and Iceland endeavored to further enhance youth engagement within the Council. During the Icelandic Chairmanship, the Permanent Participants' Youth Network was established and Working Groups such as SDWG and CAFF continued to engage youth participants in their projects and to foster their career development through fellowship programs.

A CHAIRMANSHIP UNDER COVID-19

The coronavirus pandemic hit the world, as Iceland was heading into the second half of its two-year Chairmanship term. While meetings were first postponed, hoping to gather delegates in-person later on in the Chairmanship, the Council's work quickly adapted to a new virtual working mode. Iceland became a trailblazer in hosting the Arctic Council's first ever virtual Senior Arctic Officials' meeting, launching new initiatives such as the Senior Arctic Officials' Marine Mechanism online, and moving an entire symposium on plastic pollution in the Arctic marine environment, into the virtual realm. Despite the unfavorable conditions, Iceland was able to advance its Chairmanship priorities and the Council's work continued without any major delays or cancellations.
“Working closely with all partners, inside as well as outside the region, is of utmost importance for both prosperity and security in the Arctic region. The conflictual elements that may result from the opening-up of the Arctic make the Council’s contribution to sustainable development in the region increasingly relevant. I truly believe that an active dialogue, based on state-of-the-art scientific research, conducted through dynamic collaboration between our countries and organizations, is the best way forward for a constructive development of the Arctic Council.”

A STRONGER ARCTIC COUNCIL
Iceland’s Chairmanship strived to enhance the constructive cooperation that has always been a key strength of the Arctic Council. Close consultations between the Arctic States and the Permanent Participants continued, and further opportunities for mutually beneficial collaboration with Observers were explored – a key priority during the Icelandic Chairmanship. Iceland offered the Council’s Observers active roles in the Senior Arctic Officials Marine Mechanism, the Plastics Symposium and organized a dedicated online Observer event on Arctic Governance.

Iceland also strengthened the cooperation between the Arctic Council and the Arctic Economic Council, on the basis of a new Memorandum of Understanding, with the shared objective of promoting responsible economic development, and hosted the first joint meeting between the Arctic Council and the Arctic Economic Council.

Furthermore, the Arctic Council under the Icelandic Chairmanship issued a statement of cooperation with the Arctic Coast Guard Forum. The aim of the statement is to further the common goal of both entities of enhancing and promoting safe, sustainable, and responsible maritime activity in the Arctic.

Last but not least, during Iceland’s Chairmanship the Arctic Council continued to work towards a strategic plan.