

ICT in the Arctic. Discussion Paper.

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ICT in the Arctic

Discussion paper

Introduction

The 2003 World Summit on the Information Society declares a common desire and commitment to build a people-centred, inclusive and development-oriented information society where people and communities can achieve their full potential in promoting sustainable development and improving quality of life.

When discussing information and communication technology in a global context, the particular needs of specific regions should be kept in mind. One such region is the circumpolar Arctic. Small remote communities, long distances and a general lack of effective infrastructure and communication characterize life in most of the Arctic.

Information technology can be an extremely valuable tool and a major contributor to sustainable development, capacity-building, human health and welfare in the region. For this reason, it is essential that residents in the Arctic be given access to cost-effective telecommunications systems with sufficient carrying capacity.

It is against this background that the Arctic Council has begun to explore ways and means to improve basic ICT services in the most rural areas of the Arctic, particularly as regards education and health services. The 2002 Inari declaration recognizes the usefulness of ICT in circumpolar capacity-building. In addition, ICT as a tool for development in the Arctic is one of the key priorities of the Icelandic Chairmanship of the Arctic Council 2002-2004. A conference devoted to ICT in the Arctic was held in Akureyri, in October 2003. The conference focused on three main areas; ICT infrastructure, distance education and telemedicine. The conference concluded among other things that the lack of basic ICT services in the most rural areas of the Arctic prevents residents of the region from developing their full potential.

On 4-5 March 2004, an international telehealth conference entitled; Innovation and Evaluation, was held in Anchorage, Alaska, building, among other things, on the results of the Akureyri conference.

The Arctic Council Sustainable Development Program provides a platform for the Council to actively explore issues relating to the improvement of economic and social conditions in the Arctic as a whole. This includes the use of information and communication technology in the Arctic.

Cooperation with a number of actors is imperative for developing ways to increase the use of and access to ICT in the Arctic. The Arctic Council has cooperated with the Northern Forum, the Standing Committee of Parliamentarians of the Arctic Region (SCPAR), the Nordic Council of Ministers and the University of the Arctic, among others. In the future, increased cooperation with the private sector will also be necessary.

Suggested Actions

General

The Arctic Council will maintain the issue of ICT in the Arctic on its agenda, with the aim of improving basic ICT services in the most rural areas of the Arctic, enhance education and health services in the widely dispersed Arctic communities through ICT and support the development of relevant content.

The Arctic Council will keep abreast of ICT developments in the international arena. Measures should be taken to draw attention to the specific needs of the Arctic globally, e.g. at the 2005 World Summit on the Information Society, and ensure that international regulatory agreements provide fair access of Arctic residents to ICT services.

An Arctic ICT Task Force

An Arctic ICT task force should be set up, building on the CITF, the Arctic telemedicine community, the University of the Arctic and working groups existing at the Barents and Nordic levels with strong representation of user interests.

The task force would operate under the auspices of the Arctic Council and its Sustainable Development Working Group and be comprised of 10-15 representatives from the Arctic Council, including Permanent Participants, the scientific and business sectors, the Northern Forum, the University of the Arctic, SCPAR and others.

The aim of the task force would be to share information on best practices and promote awareness of existing Arctic ICT initiatives in all relevant fields, including education and telemedicine.

Other tasks of the task force would, among other things, be to:

- facilitate and support the setting up of a specific ICT pilot project within a limited and carefully selected area in the Arctic (proposed by SCPAR). The project should identify specific needs of disadvantaged and disconnected local communities and promote implementation of connecting networks, through appropriate infrastructure and ICT access. The project, identified as the Target Region Arctic IC Enquiry (TRAICE), would be established with a view to the possibility of reproducing it elsewhere (see attachment 1);
- support the establishment of a wireless Arctic network (proposed by the University of Alaska) (see attachment 2);
- support a pilot telemedicine project of the State of Alaska, the Sakha Republic and the Khanty-Mansiysk Autonomous Okrug (proposed by the Northern Forum and the Alaska Native Tribal Health Consortium (ANTHC));
- encourage the establishment of the Arctic Virtual Library to support Arctic people and science;
- take measures to support the use of small Arctic languages.