

## **Arctic Social Indicator Project (ASI)**

### **Summary of project description**

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#### **Summary:**

The Arctic Social Indicator Project (ASI) constitutes a follow-up to the Arctic Human Development Report (AHDR), with the goal of establishing a working group to develop Arctic social indicators to help facilitate the tracking and monitoring of human development in the Arctic over time. The development of some means of monitoring trends in human development in the Arctic would be extremely helpful from the perspective of those involved in the policy process.

The objective is to devise a limited set of indicators that reflect key aspects of human development in the Arctic, that are tractable in terms of measurement, and that can be monitored over time at a reasonable cost in terms of labour and material resources. The pursuit of this goal will encompass several distinct steps, starting with a workshop focusing on the design of indicators suitable for use in the Arctic and moving on to the development of procedures needed to measure and monitor these indicators on a regular basis. The report on Arctic social indicators will be directed at a broad audience, including the science community, inhabitants of the Arctic, policymakers at all levels, and the Arctic Council and its SDWG.

#### **Social Indicators:**

An indicator is a measure used as a gauge of the state of some factor of interest to policymakers and analysts; it is not an operationalization of the factor itself. Body temperature, for example, is an indicator of human health; it is not a measure of health as such. GDP and productivity are indicators of economic development; they are not simply operationalizations of development per se.

To be useful, indicators should be (i) generalizable and stable, (ii) easy to measure in a broadly accepted manner, and (iii) suitable for use in longitudinal analyses.

Ease of (preferably quantitative) measurement is a critical factor. Indicators like GDP and longevity are appealing precisely for this reason. Everyone understands the limitations of these measures. GDP, for example, rewards pollution. Whereas the damages arising from pollution normally do not appear in calculations of GDP, the production and use of technologies designed to clean up pollution after the fact actually increase GDP. Even so, GDP per capita has lasting appeal as an indicator of economic development because we have devised procedures for calculating the value of this indicator that are more or less comparable in spatial terms and stable over time.

All efforts to develop indicators must strike a balance between the analytic attractions of relying on a single indicator and the temptation to introduce a large number of indicators in

the interests of developing an accurate picture of complex and multi-dimensional phenomena. Tempting as it is analytically, the use of a single indicator such as GDP per capita as an indicator of economic development is problematic in addressing any complex phenomenon. This would certainly be the case with regard to something as multi-dimensional as human development. But going to the other extreme and ending up with dozens of indicators in the interests of capturing all the dimensions of a complex phenomenon is equally problematic. Not only does this create major measurement problems; it also leads in many cases to a jumble of disparate measures that are difficult to interpret.

Ideally, then, it is desirable to develop a small suite (say 3-5) of indicators that capture the essential features of the phenomenon in question and that can be measured empirically in a simple and intuitively appealing manner. Finding ways to normalize and aggregate these measures into a single index is naturally appealing. It allows for simple rankings among members of the relevant universe of cases (e.g. cultures, communities, individual health). But it is certainly not necessary. It may turn out that the use of several indicators (e.g. GDP per capita, productivity, inflation, and interest rates as measures of economic performance) is perfectly acceptable. The critical step is to devise a small suite of measures that do a good job of capturing the essential features of the phenomenon in question.

### **Arctic Social Indicators**

Given this background, what can we say about the selection of indicators designed for use in measuring and monitoring human development in the Arctic? Without doubt, the most influential method currently in use in this realm is the UN Human Development Index (HDI). Computed annually, the HDI is a composite of three components: (i) GDP per capita, (ii) longevity, and (iii) a measure of literacy/education. As an alternative to the use of GDP per capita alone, the HDI has been highly successful. It has allowed analysts to demonstrate conclusively that beyond a certain point the correlation between GDP per capita and the HDI becomes weak or even non-existent. In essence, this means that adding to material wealth do not result in enhanced human development among those whose material needs are satisfied.

The HDI, however, is not a good indicator of human development in the Arctic and for several reasons. GDP per capita typically fails to take into account many goods and services enjoyed by those who participate in subsistence economies or even the mixed economies that are widespread in the Arctic today. Conventional measures of literacy/education omit the production and transfer of knowledge and skills that constitute important features of traditional cultures and societies. Even longevity is an ambiguous measure. As the incidence of suicide and accidental death in many Arctic communities suggests, those who experience anomie resulting from the effects of rapid social change often suffer severely in terms of well-being, even when they have access to abundant material goods and services.

Three elements of human development seem particularly prominent in the Arctic: (i) fate control or the ability to guide one's own destiny, (ii) cultural integrity or belonging to a viable local culture, and (iii) contact with nature or interacting closely with the natural world.

Other approaches might turn to different aspects of human development, including measures of community viability, human health, and gender relations. We know, for examples, that there are major differences among individual Arctic communities – even those that resemble each other in many ways – in terms of the well-being of their residents. But we do not currently have an indicator or a small suite of indicators suitable for use in measuring these differences and monitoring them over time.

**Working group:**

The first step in pursuing the goal of developing Arctic social indicators is the establishment of a working group that will be given the task of constructing a set of clearly defined indicators suitable for measuring change in terms of human development in the Arctic. The working group, involving approximately 25-30 participants - several of whom have been involved in the production of the AHDR - will have representation from a wide selection of Arctic communities as well as social scientists who are knowledgeable about the Arctic and who have a good understanding of the nature and uses of social indicators. The set of participants will include representatives of the UN Development Programme – the agency responsible for calculating the HDI – and SLiCA representatives.

**Key Deliverable:**

Report on Arctic Social Indicators. A website will be created for viewing and downloading the report. There will be a presentation and discussion of ASI findings at the Sixth International Congress of Arctic Social Sciences (ICASS IV) in Nuuk, summer 2008 – a conference of the International Arctic Social Sciences Association, IASSA.

**Update:**

The ASI project was welcomed and approved by the SDWG at the Salekhard meeting as follow-up to the AHDR, with integration of results from other projects, including parallel project IASOS, and projects such as SLiCA, ArcticStat, and Econor.

Members of the working group will participate in a workshop to be held in Akureyri in the summer of 2006. Preliminary work will be presented and discussed at this meeting.

A meeting of members of the planning group took place in Cambridge in March 2006.

The first ASI workshop will be held in Akureyri, Iceland, late summer 2006. Working group participants will prepare preliminary work to be shared and discussed at this workshop.

Subsequent workshops are planned for 2007 and 2008.