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Connectivity in the Arctic

Discussion paper

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Background

The importance of well-functioning communication networks and services for human activities, safety and economic development in the Arctic is widely recognized. The first attempt to address the issue of connectivity within the Arctic Council was performed by the Sustainable Development Working Group. In 2008, the SDWG produced *an Arctic information and communication technology assessment*. The aim of the work was to find solutions for improved connectivity in the Arctic in order to increase human and social capital, enhance economic development and improve the quality of life in the Arctic.

During the US Chairmanship 2015-17, the previous Task Force on Telecommunications Infrastructure in the Arctic (TFTIA), prepared a circumpolar assessment of telecommunications infrastructure and networks, as well as a set of findings and recommendations meant to encourage and assist with the development of improved telecommunications infrastructure in the Arctic. The assessment outlined the needs of local communities in the Arctic, as well as the needs of other categories of users, such as the scientific community and search and rescue operators.

At the Arctic Council 2017 Ministerial meeting in Fairbanks, the Ministers established the Task Force on Improved Connectivity to compare the needs of those who live, operate, and work in the Arctic with available infrastructure, and to work with the industry and the Arctic Economic Council to encourage the creation of required infrastructure with an eye toward pan-Arctic solutions, and to report to Ministers in 2019.

The Task Force on Improved Connectivity (TFICA) started its work in Helsinki in November 2017. In total 40 participants attended the meeting including all Arctic States, one PP and three WGs. Three invited guest speakers, including the Arctic Economic Council and the private service providers, participated.

The delegates highlighted further understanding of user needs, exploration of new technological solutions, including public-private-partnerships and commercial opportunities, sharing of best practices, focusing on pan-Arctic solutions, emphasizing maritime and aeronautical safety and search and rescue, building upon the work and perspectives of the Arctic Council Working Groups and focusing on the human dimension of connectivity as key elements in the work to improve connectivity in the Arctic.

As a result from intersessional work a new draft table was introduced. It takes into account comments made by delegations at the Helsinki meeting with a stronger focus on public-private partnerships. A general picture of financial models (public, private, PPP, paid by users/customers) and presentation of 5-10 concrete examples (services, financing, technical solutions etc.) will be in the focus of the work.

The second TFICA meeting will be held 16-17 May 2018 in Washington DC. The aim is to engage with the telecommunications industry to deepen the analyses of the different user needs versus the available technologies and services. A number of companies and organizations representing a wide variety of innovative technological solutions will be invited to participate.

TFICA will continue to look for synergies with the Arctic Economic Council, including participation in the upcoming 3rd Arctic Broadband Summit in Sapporo, Japan, 27-28 June.

User needs should be in focus at all times in the connectivity work. The emphasis in the Levi SAO meeting on 23 of March will be on the needs of the different user groups and ways to solve everyday challenges to improve connectivity. The presenters will address the challenges that limited connectivity poses for communities in the Arctic. They will also present some of the opportunities that new telecommunications services and infrastructure solutions, including satellite technology and 5G networks, would provide for the Arctic. The TFICA will report on the status of its work.

Action by the SAOs

The SAOs and the Permanent Participants are invited to discuss the ways in which the Arctic Council should address the issue of connectivity and to give guidance for the future work of TFICA. The Working Groups will be invited to give their perspectives on the role of connectivity in their work. Especially views on digital divide and the ability of the local communities to make available digital services at a reasonable cost would be welcome.