

YOUTH ENGAGEMENT IN THE ARCTIC COUNCIL

Paving the Way Forward:
Executive Summary

2023 - 2025



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ARCTIC COUNCIL
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Paving the Way Forward: Assessment and Recommendations for SAOs and PPs

Executive Summary

Background

The Arctic Council's approach to youth engagement has traditionally been fragmented, occurring on an *ad hoc* basis through individual Chairmanships and varying across the Working Groups (WGs), with a few being notably active. At the Permanent Participants' (PPs) level, however, individual PP organizations have consistently prioritized youth engagement over the past years. While some initiatives have meaningfully engaged youth and sustained their involvement, the lack of an overarching coordinated approach to youth has been acknowledged as a weakness for the Arctic Council.

As it currently stands, there appears to be insufficient guidance at the subsidiary bodies' level, limited or no funding, and inadequate youth participation. This constrains the exploration of youth engagement and prevents realizing reciprocal value for both the Council and the youth. **Now that the Council has made youth engagement a priority in its Strategic Plan for 2021-2030 and the Reykjavik declaration, there is a clear need for comprehensive guidance and support, and a coordinated, strategic approach to youth moving forward.** If the Council is committed to its strategic emphasis on youth engagement going forward, this requires targeted objectives, as well as clear taskings and sustained guidance and funding for the Council's subsidiary bodies and Permanent Participants to enable Arctic youth's participation.

Towards an Arctic Council Youth Strategy (or) Youth Approach

This comprehensive assessment of youth engagement in the Arctic Council has been conducted by the Arctic Council Secretariat (ACS) thanks to special funding provided by the United States with an aim to strengthen the Council's ability to advance youth engagement. Prepared in close collaboration with the Arctic States, PPs, and subsidiary bodies of the Arctic Council, the assessment examines in detail past practices of youth engagement in the Council, or the lack of, and highlights both successes and shortcomings. In summary:

- **The Council has increasingly prioritized youth engagement through specific initiatives spearheaded by various Chairmanships.** For example, the Icelandic Chairmanship (2019-2021) elevated youth engagement discussions at the SAO and PP level, while the Russian Federation (2021-2023) introduced youth as a Chairmanship priority including Russian youth envoys and national events. For their part, the Norwegian Chairship (2023-2025) has further emphasized youth as a cross-cutting priority, establishing a Chairship Youth Committee, which is tasked with assisting in the planning and execution of the first Arctic Council Chairship-led Arctic Youth Conference – scheduled for January 2025 in Tromsø.
- Concurrently, **the PPs have led meaningful youth involvement in their organizations through different projects and initiatives** like the PP Youth Network and Arctic Youth Leaders' Summit, with the aim of fostering partnerships between youth and decision-makers. WGs such as the Conservation of Arctic Flora and Fauna (CAFF) and the Sustainable Development Working Group (SDWG) in turn have integrated youth into their projects and CAFF has a dedicated youth strategy. Yet, all WGs seek clearer guidance should they be mandated to enhance and coordinate youth engagement moving forward.

- **The Council has the potential to offer a well-defined platform for youth engagement**, similar to its sister organizations such as the Barents Euro-Arctic Council (BEAC), the Council of the Baltic Sea States (CBSS), and the Nordic Council of Ministers (NCM) who all have well-structured and ingrained approaches that facilitate inclusion of youth in their decision-making processes. Recently, the European Commission has also launched a comprehensive project to increase dialogue and capacity building between Arctic and European youth through its EU Arctic Policy and has held its first Arctic Youth Dialogue during the 2024 EU Arctic Forum and Indigenous Peoples' dialogue in Brussels. Other Arctic Council Observers have equally been refining their approach to youth, as outlined in the report.
- **The SAOs and PPs can provide the Council with a comprehensive youth engagement strategy for sustaining youth involvement, informed by Arctic youth, and supported by financial resources, during times of significant environmental and social Arctic change.** This strategy has the potential to maintain and further enhance the Arctic Council's role and relevance as the preeminent forum of cooperation in the Arctic for the next generation of Arctic leaders. It should include clear objectives, dedicated funding, and guidance for the Council and its subsidiary bodies.

Findings

The assessment has identified three major findings. Based on these, specific recommendations to enhance youth engagement in the Arctic Council have been developed for further consideration by SAOs and PPs.

- **There exists little to no guidance on how the Council, as a forum, should achieve youth engagement in the short and long term.** The need for guidance and coordination was stressed by multiple contributors to this report. Current youth engagement happens on a case-by-case basis, which prevents continued work on topics relevant to youth and the Council. There is a range of initiatives to learn from, but they remain in silos and could greatly benefit from greater coordination. There is a pressing need to identify common objectives and co-develop strategies for structuring the Council's approach in collaboration with youth. Additionally, the subsidiary bodies of the Arctic Council lack the tools and resources to engage youth in their work; currently, this happens when resources allow or not at all. The PPs have supported their youth in the Arctic Council framework with support from IPS, however, they would also benefit from clear and defined objectives within the Arctic Council. Without a coherent path forward, the Council could contribute to consultation fatigue among Arctic youth and there is a risk of echoing past discussions without providing tangible outcomes.
- **There appears to be a strong will from the Arctic States, PPs, and WGs to enhance youth engagement in the Arctic Council's work, but the Council has yet put forward the planning, resources and capacity it needs to enable this effort.** While there are several examples where the Arctic Council has benefited from youth engagement at the project level and through key milestone events and initiatives, this engagement has unfortunately not been adopted in a substantial manner at the SAO-PP level, where youth would have a voice to inform, advise, or recommend on the Council's overall agenda. A way forward for the Arctic Council to enhance youth engagement would necessitate close cooperation with Arctic youth ensuring diverse perspectives and cohesive, sustainable, and long-term youth participation. Collaborating with relevant youth-focused programs and organizations outside the Council could also further strengthen these efforts.
- **There is general agreement that essential funding is required to support comprehensive youth engagement, enabling the development of programs, training, and participation in**

project and decision-making processes. Lack of funding has been identified as a cross-cutting problem. Additional financial resources are required to support comprehensive youth engagement in the Council. Securing appropriate funding is necessary for the Council to foster a more inclusive and dynamic environment, empowering the next generation and enabling the subsidiary bodies to support and involve young people. The Council has the expertise, structure and experience to elevate youth, but it lacks the resources to facilitate their involvement in practice.

Recommendations on a way forward

The Arctic Council can take decisive action to realize its priority to strengthen the role of youth in its work while placing itself at the forefront of regional high-level cooperation including Arctic youth. The following three recommendations are presented as a potential first step to enable this process and, most importantly, improve the Council's overall planning, execution, and coordination on youth engagement in the years to come:

Recommendation 1: Increase Coordination by Developing an Arctic Council Youth Engagement Strategy

- Informed and developed by Arctic Council youth in collaboration with PPs, WGs, relevant Observers;
- Aligned with the Arctic Council's Strategic Plan 2021-2025, a strategy could build capacity amongst youth and enhance targeted outreach from the Council, explore creative ways to engage and empower youth in the work of the Council, and encourage practical and innovative methods to support youth cooperation in the Arctic.

Recommendation 2: Establish a Youth Advisory Body to Engage within the Arctic Council and Inform the Engagement Strategy

- Composed of youth representatives from WGs and PPs and potentially other relevant groups;
- Tasked with developing and executing the Youth Engagement Strategy and integrating youth perspectives to influence the Council's agenda setting process;
- Find ways to collaborate with existing Arctic youth programs and organizations to enhance coordination and effectiveness of the Arctic Council.

Recommendation 3: Establish a Funding Mechanism for Comprehensive Youth Engagement in the Arctic Council

- Establish a dedicated youth engagement funding mechanism allocated exclusively for youth engagement activities at the subsidiary body level, based on a youth engagement plan;
- These budgets are intended to support initiatives such as youth-led or focused projects at the PP and WG-level, enable youth participation in high-level meetings, and support capacity-building programs ensuring that young people in the Arctic have the resources needed to actively contribute to Arctic cooperation.

While this assessment has outlined the key trends and milestone events in Arctic Council youth engagement, **it is imperative that the Arctic Council learns from its past efforts and focuses on defining goals and a clear and coordinated path forward on youth engagement in a rapidly changing**

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Arctic. By implementing the recommendations outlined in this report, the Arctic Council can take initial and decisive steps towards enhancing youth involvement, ensuring that the voices and perspectives of Arctic youth are integrated into decision-making processes, and empower Arctic youth in shaping the future of the region.