

Commentary

Building Partnership for a Sustainable Future

Erica M. Dingman

The Arctic Council has earned a noteworthy reputation as an institution that exemplifies the ideals of cooperation and inclusion. As a consensus-based forum, the motions adopted amongst Arctic states with the political participation of indigenous peoples is a testament to the Council's democratic practices. As an aspect of the present U.S. Arctic Council Chairmanship strategy (2015-2017), these ideals were recently extended to promote the development of domestic and cross-border public-private partnerships. Outlined in the Implementation Plan for the National Strategy for the Arctic Region (White House, 2014), the purpose is to leverage private investment into the Arctic region to address the shortage of maritime infrastructure, telecommunications, and for development of renewable energy projects. The U.S.-Canada Joint Statement on Climate, Energy and Arctic Leadership (White House, 2016a) emphasized the later, calling for the 'advancement of clean growth'. Shortly thereafter, U.S. and Nordic leaders announced in a Joint Statement (White House, 2016b) a shared commitment for 'shifting to low carbon economies' and acceleration of a 'transition to a clean energy future' acknowledging the impact of climate change specifically in the Arctic region. Leaders recognize that private sector partnerships are a fundamental requirement to achieve such lofty goals.

Building such public-private partnerships in the Arctic and with Arctic residents, however, will likely meet with a unique set of challenges. Those challenges will arise from a broad mix of issues. The diversity of participants alone – cross-sector, multicultural, different sets of expertise, and at times crossing national boundaries – working toward mutually beneficial outcomes will assuredly encounter impediments along the way. Southerners, a term used on occasion or implied by Arctic

residents to differentiate between those who live in the region and those who do not, likely live in different cultural worlds, and a diversity of languages and cognitive processes can implant hurdles in the pathway of a projects success.

Yet if implemented methodically the rewards of development far surpass pure economics. Financial goals, coupled with high environmental imperatives and substantive local stakeholder input that contributes to the livelihoods and wellbeing of those who live in the Arctic are far more likely to result in improved outcomes. Success in the Arctic now requires a depth of sub-national and indigenous participation not articulated with such vigor in decades past. Likewise, trust, relationship building, and willingness for active listening and learning are imperatives for reaching common goals.

The Pacific Northwest Economic Region (PNWER) represents one notable cross border consortium comprising representatives from ten U.S. and Canada state, provincial or territorial jurisdictions. Public sector representatives from the northern jurisdictions of Alaska, Yukon, and the Northwest Territories shape PNWERs Arctic Caucus (n/d, a) which provides a forum for information sharing and collaboration among northern peoples, inclusive of the private sector, to “communicate community interests and to influence policy.” PNWERs objectives do not preclude the extraction of natural resources, but the organizations Energy & Environment Working Group aims to develop net-zero energy building demonstration projects, which includes the Inuvik Northern Sustainable House completed in 2014. During the early planning stages community elders representing both the Gwich’in and the Inuvialuit, and community stakeholders from both the public and private sector were included in the design process to contribute local perspectives. Offered the option of a two-storey, one-and-a-half, or one storey duplex, for example, the latter option best met the cultural and lifestyle needs of community members, and the duplex design contributed to the objective of designing highly energy-efficient housing (Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation, n/d).

In addition to this example of sustainable housing, Arctic economies are in need of investment: infrastructure is lacking and employment opportunities in short supply. With few deepwater ports along the Arctic coastlines of Canada and U.S. the current desire for additional facilities in both countries aims to accommodate not only commercial shipping but also auxiliary activities adding to the economic growth of surrounding communities. Vastly improved telecommunications systems would create connectivity, a necessity for economic growth in today’s society (Pacific Northwest Economic Region, n/d, b). Increased economic activity based on non-extractive production would support environmental protections, and long-term sustainable employment so needed to help alleviate the unacceptable level of social ills that plague so many Arctic communities today. For example, the rate of suicide among Canadian Inuit, particularly the youth, is eleven times that of other Canadians resulting from a number of factors including poverty and limited opportunities for employment (Inuit Tuttarvingat, n/d). If Arctic residents are to build a healthy sustainable future, from both the economic and environmental perspective, investment into infrastructure is vital for a future aimed at depleting global dependency on extractive resource industry for economic growth.

How that future is determined is still a matter of speculation, although it is readily apparent that an increasing number of people are attempting to understand and shape what that future may be.

In recognition of impending change, the Arctic Economic Council was founded during Canada's most recent chairmanship of the Arctic Council and met for the first time in September 2014. And in January 2016 Guggenheim Partners, a U.S.-Based global investment firm, were the first to endorse the World Economic Forum's Arctic Investment Protocol, which attempts to create a better framework for international investment based on the UN Sustainable Development Goals.

From a broader global perspective, indications suggest that a new approach toward development that incorporates economic growth with environmental protections may be on the horizon. Indeed, amongst a growing number of constituents from the investment and business communities it's a long-term strategy that indicates a global transition, which may mark a major turning point in world history. Yet for such a transition to take place, a wide-ranging group of communities from local indigenous groups to investment firms and governments will need to engage in substantive dialogue that thrives not on the status quo but rather emerges from a foundation of non-traditional thinking. As Scott MinerD (2013), global chief investment officer of Guggenheim Partners, stated: "it is easy to define the [Arctic's] future with the vocabulary of the past. But as we chart a course ahead, we must make sure that we learn from the past, rather than mindlessly repeating it." As with any meaningful transition, however, it will take time to see the fruits of change, if in fact the trend toward sustainable development remains on track.

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