

# Introduction: The Northern Research Forum as a Platform for Cross-Sectorial Dialogue

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Briefly stated, the Northern Research Forum (NRF) is a forum for dialogue on northern issues, with its main goal „to provide a highly qualified forum, or even a ‘village square’, for the discussion and debate of research on northern matters, with an agenda to be carried out by and between researchers and different interest groups.“<sup>1</sup>

It is a forum, not an organisation, for dialogue on northern, even ‘hot’, issues between researchers, politicians, civil servants, business people, NGO-activists, and academics. Quantity is not the point here but rather individual interest and participation. In other words, the main idea of the NRF is, on the one hand, to gather experts together for discussion and agenda design by the research community, in order to create a fruitful venue for innovative, practical discussion and the exchange of new ideas; and, on the other hand, to focus on critical issues, especially *opportunities*, which exist and which people face in the societies of the northern regions, in the context of social, political and environmental changes and economic globalization. And of course, when you deal with opportunities, you deal with the core idea of politics.

It is both relevant and interesting that the NRF is associated with the University of the Arctic, the new circumpolar university ‘without walls’. In this context and under that umbrella, the NRF is a platform

providing new opportunities for effective policy-relevant discussion, concerning the exchange of ideas and research findings, and the role of science, among northerners and other people.

## The Basic Idea: A Cross-Sectorial Dialogue

In the world of globalization, trans-border, and trans-boundary co-operation and communication, the lowering, and even elimination, of borders is the trend. Although it is not a new phenomenon, it is universal and now exists in a new context. But how exactly does it affect the situation within a society? and between different sectors of a society? and between different parts and sectors of the world community?

There are, on the one hand, contacts, discussion and co-operation between business, politics, administration, civil society and the research community. On the other hand, there are attempts to influence, such as lobbying by companies and NGOs, to try to have more say on politics and political decision-making processes, and among politicians and civil servants, especially just before decision-making takes place.

To the best of my knowledge, however, communication, even thinking, across different sectors is not very common and is, in fact, much needed. One of

the basic challenges of modern societies and the global community is how to cross borders and overcome barriers between different stakeholders' sectors.

At the beginning of the new century, one of the main dilemmas facing global and inter-governmental organisations is their lack of legitimacy in the eyes of the public. The result has been larger, and more furious, demonstrations and riots against globalization at world summits of inter-governmental organisations in 2000 and 2001. In part, these activities have occurred due to lack of a wider dialogue, and they show that there is a need not only for dialogue but also openness and a new kind forum between decision-makers and citizens, as many civil organisations have demanded. Indeed there are already, as in the context of the European Union, proposals and plans by politicians to integrate civil society into the official processes by creating new kinds of fora for wider discussion.

The need for cross-sectorial dialogue is even greater in the situation created by global changes on the one hand, and the information flood, new technology and new innovations, such as gene manipulation, on the other. These have made the world, i.e. the economic, social and political mechanisms of the modern societies, more and more complicated - so complicated, even, that it is a challenge not only for a social and moral understanding of our modern society, and the traditional decision-making mechanisms of the current political system, but also a challenge for democracy. And unfortunately, there is not much scientific or financial investment in research on alternative political discussion and decision structures and mechanisms.

Substance and content are the most important things, but methods, structures and procedures also matter. Here, communication across sectorial borders and between different stakeholders is necessary for the balanced development of society. One should bear in mind, however, that one of the fundamental phenomena of politics remains, that there is always an alternative, you have only to find it.

One problem here is that even a concrete implemen-

tation of dialogue is not simple, and there are not so many actors doing, or even trying to do, it. Or rather, there is, in principle a dialogue going on, but the structures for that are the traditional ones, where for example, there is simply too little time for an open discussion due to too many keynote-speakers or panelists, or there is a division of participation into working-groups according to sectors or interest groups. Possibly, even, a discussion forum between representatives of different stakeholders might be established, but the working methods generally represent the traditional way of discussion, and not an innovative dialogue.

A lack of a cross-sectorial communication is not, however, a requisite or implicit part of social structures, but more a part of the traditional governance and power structures, where orders mostly go from top down to bottom. In contrast, however, communication within a society and between different sectors of one society, and in an international context between societies, is both possible and necessary in order to create something new and better not only for individuals but also for society. Therefore, cross-sectorial and intercultural communication, which can also be interpreted as a long-range goal of the scientific community, is a main focus of the NRF.

There is also another interesting and relevant phenomenon, i.e. the interplay between science and politics. If we agree that science is needed, whether for trying to solve problems or for developing new technology, it becomes important to interpret and transform new research findings into a form that is useful for decision-making and vision creation in modern northern societies. It is possible, when bridging the gap between theory and practice, to try to do this, but it requires an understanding of science that emphasises its social relevance.

When trying to influence decision-makers to utilise research and to engage in a discussion with researchers, it is critical to emphasize increased understanding of, and contributions to, practical solutions to current and forthcoming issues. These include in the North, for example, sustainable development and community viability, peace and security,

social and environmental policy, and the impact of global change. Thus the interplay of science and politics, theory and practice is another main goal of the NRF.

## General Background

A great, and even dramatic, transformation, with an increase in trans-national and inter-regional co-operation, has taken place in the North as part of the general changes which have taken place in the international system in the 1990s.

Among other things, great political and institutional changes in governance have taken place in the North including the autonomy of Nunavut, the establishment of Scotland's own parliament, and the 'new' independence of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania; in general, democracy has been institutionalised in a new way. Northern economies have been integrated into the globalized world economy, and the Arctic Eight have become active in northern international co-operation and have either defined, or are defining, their own 'northern dimension' as a part of their foreign policies - like the Northern Dimension of Canada's Foreign Policy, and the Northern Dimension of the European Union program.<sup>2</sup>

The two main features of note at this new stage of the North are the decrease in importance of military-based security, and the emphasis on the utilisation of and competition for natural resources. In general, the northern regions are undergoing large and fundamental structural changes, and many peripheral areas are becoming more and more sparsely populated. No easy solution applies to the situation, but rather, there is a need for comprehensive discussion between actors of the regions and those from outside the region on the one hand, and between all sectors of each northern society on the other.

The existence and activities of various non-governmental and regional entities such as counties, northern indigenous peoples, environmental organisations and universities, and even the scientific community as a whole, have made them actors in the interna-

tional and inter-regional co-operation of the North. As with governmental actors, and other actors from outside, their interests are varied and complex, sometimes even competing or conflicting, resulting in the creation of a new kind of regional dynamics in the North.<sup>3</sup>

The North, however, seems to be not only rich in natural resources, and full of exotic and complex interests, but also fresh and innovative. For example, cooperation across national borders and regionalisation are seen here as a realistic possibility, and even as a new resource, for the development of the future. The North might even be viewed as a kind of driving force in the transition period, and the concept of a „Northern Dimension“ as a metaphor for a new kind of North-South relationship.

When considering the main goals and essential nature of the NRF, it should be remembered that behind its formation is not only the above-mentioned transition of the international system, but also the increasing role played by non-governmental and regional actors in international co-operation. These phenomena and the current situation in the North have both encouraged a new kind of contribution and expertise by the scientific community and made obvious the need for dialogue between science and politics, decision-makers and researchers. The academic community is active, in this regard, with its basic work and knowledge, its networks, visions and critics, and the NRF offers its modest contribution towards a dialogue of the future.

## Procedural Background and the First Forum

The duration of the NRF process has so far been short: President Olafur Ragnar Grimsson launched the initiative in September 1998<sup>4</sup>; the Feasibility Report, which was made by the University of Lapland, came out in the summer of 1999<sup>5</sup>; the Steering Committee of the NRF started its work in October 1999, following which the NRF became one of the programmatic activities of the University of the Arctic; and, the first Northern Research Forum (here

the 1<sup>st</sup> Forum) took place in November 2000, in Akureyri and Reykjavik, Iceland. If the NRF started as an Icelandic-Finnish initiative, it spread quickly from Northern Europe into the whole Circumpolar North, and even further.

The 1<sup>st</sup> Forum, with its 110 participants representing different stakeholders from all over the Circumpolar North, was visible evidence that the NRF is not only an idea, but a reality. The five themes of the 1<sup>st</sup> Forum were broad ones, challenging and innovative. The general aim was to steer away from the familiar method of viewing issues of global concern in a South-North format, and to avoid the traditional division of issues along the lines of different fields, sectors or disciplines.

And, finally, our conference slogan - North meets North - includes also the horizontal East-West connections, which have existed across history: these include, for example, communication lines in the North Atlantic during the Viking Age, and the Pomor trade between Northern Norway and the White Sea region in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. This kind of regional, or even sub-regional, dynamic can be a real possibility for us again at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, providing an opportunity - since the fall of the iron curtain - to institutionalise the North in a new, 'old' way, if only we are open-minded towards the relevance of history.

A relevant part of the 1<sup>st</sup> Forum was the creative atmosphere provided by the design of the program: no ready frameworks for discussion and no obligatory tasks, but rather an open-minded atmosphere, and curiosity towards new research findings, concepts, and crossing points. There was also enough time, and a relaxed atmosphere, for dialogue which stimulated many participants not only to make their own contributions but also to take part in the other discussions.

Preparations for the Forum included several rounds of discussion in 2000, in particular, subfora such as the North Colloquium in Edmonton, Canada, the Petrozavodsk Event in the Karelian Republic, Russia, and the Social Sciences and Sustainable Development

in the Arctic, SSSD workshop in Inari and Utsjoki, Finland and Tana Bru, Norway.<sup>6</sup> Finally, the 18 invited position papers for the 1<sup>st</sup> Forum added substantially to the discussion in the theme-sessions and the so-called square hours by young researchers.<sup>7</sup> The sessions were well prepared, and the discussion was wide-ranging, interesting, and covered some new ground. It also raised a number of delicate, problematic, and even 'hot', issues such as the utilisation of marine mammals, ethnicity and regionalism, and the multi-dimensional use of national parks, all of which are potentially relevant and interesting research topics.

The last round was the summary session of the 1<sup>st</sup> Forum in Bessastadir, at the residence of President Olafur Ragnar Grimsson, with oral reports giving impressions of the conference, final conclusions, and proposals for follow-ups, with the motto, 'lessons to learn'. The fundamental conclusion of the summary session was that the 1<sup>st</sup> Forum proved that there is a need for cross-sectorial dialogue on northern issues in general, and especially when dealing with 'hot issues', and that there needs to be a platform for that kind of dialogue, a role which the Northern Research Forum can play.

## The NRF as Process

The NRF is intended as a biennial forum for dialogue, and plans have already been made for the 2<sup>nd</sup> Forum which will take place in September 2002, in Great Novgorod, Russia.<sup>8</sup>

The NRF is also a process, with enthusiasm and a spirit of continuity. Although short, the process has been intensive, due in large part to the fact that there has been both a lot of interest toward, and also a social need for, this kind of activity; the 1<sup>st</sup> forum has certainly contributed to its growth and development.

This process is, however, just in its infancy, and the idea is, when preparing the next forum, both to keep and to develop the process of the NRF. One way to have both continuity and to prepare for the 2<sup>nd</sup> Forum would be to organise different activities, or even sub-

fora of the NRF, covering northern issues in different regions of the North. Although it is not necessary to establish a formal NRF membership, it would be useful to create an NRF network, founded by the participants of the 1<sup>st</sup> Forum, for communication between different stakeholders.

A relevant part of the process will be to continue discussion of substantive and thematic issues raised by the 1<sup>st</sup> Forum. The general idea is to have a few, but not too many, main themes and one delicate and problematic issue, which can be called „Hot/Borderless Issue of the North“, on the agenda of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Forum in 2002; these issues will have a logical connection on the one hand with each other, and on the other hand with the main themes of the 1<sup>st</sup> Forum. The tentative list of possible main themes for the 2<sup>nd</sup> Forum include the historical relevance of Viking-Novgorodian contacts; traditional knowledge, and applications of new technology in the North; alternative energy, alternative energy sources, and the use of renewable energy; population dynamics, in particular optimal population, in the North; and new political innovations and structures, and security arrangements in the North.<sup>9</sup>

In short, instead of official procedures and duties the NRF has three fundamental principles which can be described by the following way: to organise and promote cross-sectorial dialogue, to be issue-orientated and concentrate on opportunities, and to be a process.

## Notes:

- <sup>1</sup> *The Northern Research Forum. The Feasibility Report.* Prepared by an ad hoc group composed of Lassi Heininen (chair), Kari Hakapää, Vilho Harle, Frank Horn, Richard Langlais, Soili Nysten-Haarala and Outi Snellman. Publications in the University of the Arctic Process No. 8. University of the Arctic Circumpolar Coordination Office. University of Lapland. Rovaniemi 1999.
- <sup>2</sup> E.g. *Europe's Northern Dimension: The BEAR Meets the South.* Publications of the Administrative Office of the University of Lapland 1997: 39. Rovaniemi; *The Northern Dimension of Canada's Foreign Policy. Executive Summary.* May 2000. Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade. Canada; *Action Plan for Northern Dimension with External and Cross-border Policies of the European Union 2000-2003.* European Council. Doc. No. 9401/00 NIS 76. Brussels, 14 June 2000.
- <sup>3</sup> E.g. Lassi Heininen, *Euroopan pohjoinen 1990-luvulla. Moniulotteisten ja ristiriitaisten intressien alue (The European North in the 1990s - A Region of Multi-functional and Conflicting Interests).* Acta Universitatis Lapponiensis 21 - Arktisen keskuksen tiedotteita/Arctic Centre Reports 30. Rovaniemi, 1999.
- <sup>4</sup> Olafur Ragnar Grimsson, President of Iceland, „The Northern European States: New Perspectives Call for Creative Research.“ Celebratory Speech, Opening Ceremony of the 20<sup>th</sup> Academic Year of the University of Lapland, September 7, 1998.
- <sup>5</sup> See the Feasibility Report, 1999.
- <sup>6</sup> See e.g. the article „Social Science and Sustainable Development in the Arctic“ in this volume.
- <sup>7</sup> See many articles of this volume.
- <sup>8</sup> See „The 2<sup>nd</sup> NRF-call for participation“ in the appendix to this volume.
- <sup>9</sup> See the List of topics, in the appendix to this volume.