

Indigenous Organizations in the Arctic Council

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1996, Ottawa, Declaration on the Establishment of the Arctic Council:

“...Affirming our commitment to the well-being of the inhabitants of the Arctic, including special recognition of the special relationship and unique contributions to the Arctic of indigenous peoples...;

Recognizing the traditional knowledge of the indigenous people of the Arctic ... and taking note of its importance ... to the collective understanding of the circumpolar Arctic;

Desiring further to provide a means for promoting cooperative activities ... and to ensure full consultation with and the involvement of indigenous people...;

Recognizing the valuable contribution and support of the Inuit Circumpolar Conference, Saami Council, and the Association of Indigenous Minorities of the Far North, Siberia and the far East of the Russian Federation in the development of the Arctic Council;

Hereby declare:

1. The Arctic Council is established as a high level forum to:

- Provide a means for promoting cooperation, coordination and interaction among the Arctic States, with the involvement of the Arctic indigenous communities...*

2. The Category of Permanent Participation is created to provide for active participation and full consultation with the Arctic indigenous representatives within the Arctic Council”

¹ The opinion expressed in the article is solely by Victoria Gofman

Fast forward to 2008, more than a decade later, how do these statements hold today? Have the good intentions of the founders and perseverance of the initial Permanent Participants fulfilled a promise of an equal and mutually respectful forum for chartering a better life for the Arctic and its peoples?

There is no simple answer to this question since this is not a black and white territory. Many complex issues, ranging from the foreign relations between the Arctic States to the domestic policies toward indigenous peoples, cast various shades of many colors on the Arctic Council's work.

It is feasible that the recent surge in the interest to the Arctic, mainly due to its increased accessibility, will lead to a revision of the Arctic Council structure and, perhaps, its legal status. Will Permanent Participants continue to be integrated in the Arctic Council if it becomes a multilateral instrument or will they lose their footing because they are not sovereign governments per se, not to be confused with the sovereign status that Tribal Councils in Alaska and First Nations in Canada have? What will happen to Permanent Participants if the Arctic Council evolves into a convention or a treaty?

Foreign policy is a prerogative of capitals. For example, the State of Alaska has been affected by the U.S. foreign policies more than any continental state of the Union but has a miniscule-to-none role in federal foreign policies. Alaska's past two centuries are a reflection of major international history-making events: the purchase of Alaska from Russia, a World War II battle field, Cold War and Amchitka nuclear tests just to name a few. Aleuts (Unangax), indigenous people of the Aleutian chain in the Bering Sea, found themselves in the midst of these events that dramatically and irreversibly altered their lives and the entire culture.

The fact that the government did not consult with the Aleut people on the decisions with life changing consequences is a part of the history of the bygone era, accepted and forgiven by many but certainly not forgotten. In the United States, changes in the domestic policies in the last several decades made it possible to insure that local residents and indigenous peoples are informed and consulted whenever major developments are planned in their homeland but involvement of indigenous organizations in relevant foreign policy matters has continued to be considered unnecessary.

Should the Arctic Council become an international instrument with vested powers, it would be a tremendous step forward to continue its partnership between the States and indigenous organizations in addressing all issues without exceptions. The Arctic Council provides one of the few forums where indigenous organizations have a unique role in discussing foreign policies related primarily to the protection of the environment. Ironically, AIA and other Alaska Permanent Participants have better access to some of the foreign policy issues than the State of Alaska.

The fact that a small indigenous non-profit organization can share a negotiation table with ambassadors and officials of all Arctic States is a remarkable act of recognition of a nation albeit without national borders, an anthem, and taxes. There are no other organizations or forums that would provide a mechanism for a direct participation of an organization such as AIA in international scientific assessments of the magnitude of the Arctic Climate Impact Assessment released in 2004 and the Arctic Marine Shipping Assessment expected to be published in 2009. These two benefits alone give AIA a competitive edge in the development of its research programs such as the Bering Sea Sub Network (BSSN) and in informing the Aleut region about the newest socio-economic and environmental trends in the North.

Having access to the opportunities does not automatically lead to the ability to make use of them. Considering that the Arctic Council, as it stands today, is a circum-Arctic body for implementation of scientific research programs aimed at advancement of the sustainable development of the Arctic, Permanent Participants can receive benefits and can contribute primarily through participation in the Council's programs. Only participation in the projects provides a venue for "active participation and full consultation".

Yet permanent participants have not been able to fully realize these opportunities due to a myriad of problems. Some of them are financial; others are rooted in lack of experience and expertise that in turn could, at least partially, be attributed to financial difficulties as well. These problems are not insurmountable but the collective efforts of Permanent Participants so far have not been very successful. Since most of the obstacles are financial, they act as a de facto filtering preventing Permanent Participants from participation and severely limiting their input.

Over the years, some Permanent Participants developed their own strategies for funding and have been successful in obtaining funds but even money does not always guarantee a meaningful participation, such as leading a chapter of an assessment.

For example, the Aleut International Association's strategy has been a development of a large program funded by a competitive grant that would serve as a contribution to the Arctic Council processes among others. The successful program became known as the Bering Sea Sub-Network: International Community-Based Environmental Observation Alliance for the Arctic Observing Network (BSSN) that is a 2008-09 International Polar Year project implemented by the Aleut International Association in collaboration with the University of Alaska, United Nations Environment Programme – Global Resource Databank Arendal and the Alaska Native Science Commission under the auspices of the Conservation of Arctic Flora and Fauna working group of the Arctic Council. BSSN is funded by the United States National Science Foundation. The project's pilot stage, which began in June 2007, runs through May 2009. The project is expected to continue, pending further funding.

The BSSN timeline begins in 2003 during the work on ACIA, findings of which clearly indicated the need for broad-based efforts for monitoring of environmental changes. The concept was presented at the Arctic Council in 2004 and the Senior Arctic Officials recommended developing the project under the Circumpolar Biodiversity Monitoring Programme. The concept of circum-arctic network at that time proved to be unfeasible and the idea was scaled down to a regional network. In 2005, it was decided to develop a proposal to the National Science Foundation's International Polar Year (IPY) program, the Arctic Observing Network. In 2006, the concept received the IPY endorsement.

BSSN is a network of coastal communities. It consists of six villages representing six indigenous cultures: three in the Russian Federation (Kanchalan — Chukchi, Tymlat — Koryak, and Nikolskoye — Western Aleut/Unangas) and three in the United States (Gambell — Siberian Yup'ik, Togiak — Central Yu'pik, and Sand Point — Eastern Aleut/Unangan).

This project creates a structured network that provides the means for the systematic collection of information about the environment and lays a foundation for future community-based research. The network also provides for the efficient management of data gathered from community-based environmental observations.

The overall goal of BSSN is to increase understanding and knowledge of pan-Arctic processes, thereby enhancing the ability of scientists, Arctic communities, and governments to predict, plan, and respond to environmental changes and their subsequent socio-economic effects.

All BSSN communities heavily depend on marine resources of the Bering Sea. Even the most remote communities realize today that the resources are impacted by multiple stressors and concerted efforts by all peoples across the Bering Sea are needed to assure that the scientific information that is used in resource management decisions encompasses the best knowledge available, including indigenous and traditional knowledge. BSSN is one of the ways to address these concerns.

There have been many discussions in the last few years about what projects would fit to be Arctic Council projects. The strength of the Arctic Council is in its ability to generate projects demonstrating innovation and with a strong participation of the indigenous peoples.

It was quite telling that the Arctic Council neither embraced nor fully understood BSSN. It was praised by some Member States but a collective reception of the States, as expressed by their representatives, was very tepid. It takes time to change attitudes and BSSN is gradually earning its status and gaining supporters across the table.

After ten plus year of existence, the Arctic Council has yet to develop a set of rules that would welcome leadership of an Arctic Council project by a Permanent Participant's organization. It appears that some Member States may be more comfortable to see Permanent Participants stay in the wings and let the governments run the show. The Arctic is a stage where indigenous organizations are actors and it is reasonable to expect that they should be able to play some leading roles in the Arctic Council's programs.

While all is not perfect, as the Arctic Council matures in its current form or in a reformed one, there is no doubt that there will be more doors open for its indigenous organizations. It is to the benefit of the larger Arctic community that the political gains achieved in the Council by the Permanent Participants are sustained and enhanced.

References

Arctic Council (1996). *The Ottawa Declaration*.

V. Gofman, A. Friedman, & J. Walton. (2008). Bering Sea Sub-Network Annual Report 2008 (Aleut International Association), CAFF Technical report No. 17.