



PROMOTING EFFECTIVE AND MEANINGFUL ENGAGEMENT OF INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES IN NORWAY'S ARCTIC AREAS

Key messages

As climate change impacts become more frequent and intense, countries must design climate adaptation strategies that are coherent with potential environmental and social impacts. Both environmental impact assessments and climate adaptation strategies can be better informed by people with knowledge and expertise of local livelihoods. Norway's consultation processes in the Arctic areas provide an example of meaningful, public participation in the early planning phase that can contribute to improving environmental outcomes and climate resilience of local populations.

Country: [Norway](#)

Sectors: [Agriculture](#) | [Transport](#) | [Urban planning](#) | [Governance](#)

Scales: [Local](#) | [National](#) | [Regional](#)

Challenge

The Arctic region is characterised by sparse population, unique biodiversity, fragile ecosystems and slow flora and fauna recovery rates from disturbance. The Arctic's rapidly changing climate also negatively affects local livelihoods. The Norwegian Arctic is home to close to half a million people, and is notably the traditional home of the Sami minority (about 20 500 registered Sami voters). On average, about 10% of the population is indigenous. These populations are often fragile and need to permanently adapt to the impacts of climate change. However, the interests of Indigenous Peoples are not always sufficiently considered in environmental impact assessments (EIAs). Consultation processes may in some cases be undermined by asymmetric information, unequal negotiation power and lack of transparency. Investors might be tempted to strike a deal with locals that may neither benefit all members of affected communities nor allow protection of biodiversity and fragile ecosystems. Promoting effective and meaningful engagement and incorporating indigenous knowledge remains a common challenge in the Arctic region. EIAs need to properly evaluate the potential adaptation needs and identify appropriate actions that are necessary for any planned project.

Approach

The Arctic EIA project – involving members of the Arctic Council – gathered examples of good practices from across the region. Among others, it identified one example from northern Norway, where dialogue with Sami reindeer herders started at an early stage and was maintained throughout the entire process. This capitalised on local knowledge in the project design of an apartment development project near

Tromsø. The EIA indicated a negative impact on the reindeers' use of the area, which could have ended the project. However, informal meetings and inspections collected tacit knowledge and information on the actual use of the land by reindeer herders. Thanks to continued dialogue, the proponent and reindeer herders came to an agreement, which secured a migration corridor for wildlife, as well as space for local leisure activities. The solution was acceptable to all parties; it was negotiated in a transparent manner, incorporating herders' viewpoints in the EIA.

This example illustrates that meaningful public participation in the early planning phase can inform the EIA process in a positive way and strengthen local adaptive capacity. This is especially relevant for fragile Arctic areas where impact assessments must be better informed by people with knowledge and expertise of local livelihoods. This can be a lengthy process and requires a lot of flexibility. It is therefore crucial to build a relationship and trust among affected communities at the earliest possible stage. Competent authorities "need to talk to scientists and locals at the same time – not scientists first and locals after" (Arctic Council, 2019).

The right of Indigenous Peoples to participate in Norway's decision-making processes was formalised in 2005. The obligation to consult the Sami Parliament is applicable to traditional Sami areas. This is especially the case for matters concerning the resource base of the Sami culture, including land rights, land administration and competing land use. The Nature Diversity Act requires Sami knowledge to be considered in public decisions that are relevant for the conservation and sustainable use of biological, geological and landscape diversity; Norway's Planning and Building Act clarifies the tools and instruments to be used by local and regional authorities in planning processes for reindeer herding areas.

Results

The relationship between the government and the Sami community and other indigenous groups has been evolving. Evidence from recent surveys (SDWG, 2019) suggests the government of Norway has improved overall communication with the Sami community. Beyond mandatory consultations, the government also consults with other Sami interest groups, particularly in matters that directly affect Sami land use, enabling adaptation actions for local livelihoods. This has also contributed over time to enhancing awareness and knowledge of Sami issues in ministries and agencies.

Nonetheless, there is still a way to go to better consider Sami-specific concerns in national policies and better protect minority rights. A research project (Ahlness, 2020) found that "Members of the 'Nordic' majority population tend to view minority groups as less capable of ecological commitment."

Lessons learnt

Promoting effective and meaningful engagement and incorporating indigenous knowledge remains a common challenge in the Arctic region. Dialogue has to be seen to help find better solutions in response to climate change, identify adaptation needs and more strongly influence project design at an early stage. This requires continuous dialogue, beyond mandatory one-off consultations. In many cases, local knowledge can help inform adaptation planning. It is crucial to ensure that necessary adaptation actions are integrated effectively into the project planning process. EIAs need to better inform the project design and decision-making process; the engagement needs to be pursued throughout the mitigation and monitoring phases.

Further information

OECD (2022), OECD Environmental Performance Reviews: Norway 2022, OECD Environmental Performance Reviews, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/59e71c13-en>.

Arctic Council, Sustainable Development Working Group (2019), Good Practices for Environmental Impact Assessment and Meaningful Engagement in the Arctic, Arctic Council, Sustainable Development Working Group, case 12, <http://hdl.handle.net/11374/2377>.

Ahlness, E. (2020), "Greener Than Them: Environmental Bias and Commitment in Norway", Environmental Bias Experiments, presented to the Center for Environmental Politics/Society for Advancement of Scandinavian Studies, 15 May, University of Wisconsin, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/341803603_Greener_Than_Them_Environmental_Bias_and_Commitment_in_Norway.

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OECD (2022), OECD Environmental Performance Reviews: Norway 2022, OECD Environmental Performance Reviews, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/59e71c13-en>.

Link to: <https://www.oecd.org/environment/country-reviews/>.

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