
Document WSIS/PC-3/CONTR/12-E
5 May 2003
Original: English

Arctic Council

Perspectives of the Icelandic Chairmanship of the Arctic Council in relation to the Declaration of Principles and the Plan of Action for the World Summit on Information Society, Geneva, 2003

This paper illustrates the particularities of the Arctic region in the context of the information society and the work of the Arctic Council to that end.

The member states of the Arctic Council are: Canada, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Russia, Sweden and the United States. The Council is primarily a regional forum for sustainable development, mandated to address all three of its main pillars; the environmental, social and economic. The scientific work and policy guidance of the Arctic Council is carried out in several expert Working Groups focusing on such issues as sustainable development, assessing and preventing pollution and climate change in the Arctic.

Currently, the Arctic Council is giving greater focus and direction to its work on sustainable development. It is increasingly concerned about the living conditions of Arctic residents. The program of the Council's current Chair, emphasizes the importance of the information society for developing human resources and new opportunities in the region. At present, co-operation and development in the Arctic are taking place in a number of relevant areas, notably in distance learning, telemedicine and digital libraries.

Small remote communities, long distances and general lack of effective infrastructure and communication characterize the Arctic region. Arctic communities often share a similar need to adapt to the unique challenges of the Arctic environment, including geographical, technological, financial and human resource constraints. Information technology is thus an extremely valuable tool for the remote communities of the region and a major contributor to sustainable development, capacity building and human welfare in the Arctic.

The Arctic Council is a distinctive form of co-operation between governments and indigenous peoples in the Arctic region. Several organizations representing indigenous peoples are recognized as Permanent Participants and contribute to the Council's work with active participation and full consultation, enabling the Council to take full account also of traditional knowledge. Strengthening the Arctic cultural identity on the Internet is an important matter, which could involve such measures as increasing the visibility and knowledge of the Arctic indigenous cultural heritage on the Internet and creating content in the Arctic languages.

The use of information technology can increase the attractiveness of the Arctic region by boosting the possibilities of setting up and investing in knowledge-intensive enterprises in the Arctic. Various opportunities are at hand for the use of information technology to create business and employment opportunities and to support healthcare and social services in sparsely populated areas. Due to the peculiar circumstances that prevail in the Arctic region, telemedicine and distance education can be particularly valuable.

In this context, the University of the Arctic could be mentioned as an excellent example of a new higher education initiative. The University of the Arctic is a decentralized university without walls mounting programs of higher education and research, building local and regional educational capacity, and stimulating co-operation among participating institutions in the circumpolar north. The use of electronic communication is an essential part of the University's approach to bridging distances in the Arctic region and braking harsh natural barriers, helping to reinforce human knowledge and relationships to meet our goal of empowering residents of the north.

A regional forum like the Arctic Council can derive substantial benefits from the use of information technology for dissemination of information about Arctic issues of global significance. Scientific knowledge about environmental and climate change in the Arctic is an indicator of what may come about elsewhere in the world. A large-scale information system would considerably facilitate assistance to both national and local governments in developing appropriate policy responses based on the common knowledge base that is drawn from the compilation and dissemination of the Council's scientific findings, information on best practices, as well as lessons learned in the Arctic.

Given the capacity of information technology to change society and transform the economy, it is essential that residents of the Arctic region have access to a cost effective telecommunications system with sufficient carrying capacity. It is thus important to identify obstacles for the effective use of information technology in the region. The Arctic could make use of a joint study of communication and information technology infrastructure to accurately describe the extent of current networks and the use of available capacity.

In building effective telecommunications system, there is need for strong co-operation between governments and stakeholders at all levels. Societal change is rapid and the continuing adaptation of smaller societies is vital to their future and general well-being. The interest of the general public, especially youth, in information technology should facilitate this development and enable more people to become "doers" rather than passive "receivers" with respect to things that directly impinge on their quality of life.

Consistent with the principles agreed in Johannesburg, regional co-operation has an important role to play in enhancing sustainable development. As a regional body, the Arctic Council has gone from strength to strength and now makes an effort to address all three pillars of sustainable development. Extensive use of information technology in the Arctic plays an important role in promoting sustainable human development in the region.

The Icelandic Chairmanship of the Arctic Council will organize an international conference on Information and Communication Technology in the Arctic on 20-21 October 2003 in Akureyri, Iceland. The conference will focus on the opportunities and the obstacles for the use of information technology in the Arctic with special attention to the use of distance education and telemedicine.

By addressing some of the foremost challenges in the field of information technology in the Arctic, we hope to take steps towards building a comprehensive Arctic ICT community in terms of technology, finances and geography. The conclusions of the conference will be presented to the Senior Arctic Officials of the Arctic Council and hopefully also to the World Summit on the Information Society in December.