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Arctic Circle Student Briefing

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What do we mean by a sustainable Arctic?

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At the talks and plenary sessions I went to at The Arctic Circle conference in October 2021, I noticed some controversy around the word „sustainability“. There was a lot of mention of a sustainable future in the Arctic – whether it was regarding finance, renewable energy resources geopolitics or something else. It got me to thinking if overusing of the word has resulted in a somewhat empty, trendy word used to present policies in a just and environmental way. Using the word sustainability gives the idea – or promise even, of a well thought-out policy or strategy that has found a way to be a success both for people and planet. But has the branding of the world sustainability come to the point of greenwashing?

I noticed that there was a difference between the vocabulary used by different stakeholders. Scientists and professors that were presenting their studies and findings were usually very careful in expressing ideas about the future. Many of them emphasized the importance of gender equality as well as of the transfer of indigenous knowledge, youth activity, and that we must consider that Arctic ecosystems are extremely sensitive to human activity. There were also interesting discussions on geopolitics and the economical drivers explaining different agendas of international stakeholders. In these sessions I attended, I did not notice an overuse of the word sustainability but rather I had the impression that some even refrained from using it.

Policy makers, politicians and investors, however, did not shy away from using the term. Especially in the bigger plenary sessions (that noticeably were usually occupied by these bigger public figures) there was plenty of talk about sustainability. It almost became overwhelming. There was talk about the bright sustainable financial future of the Arctic as well as numerous possibilities of sustainable renewable energy resources and economic benefits for the local communities. However, it started to give the impression of a „race of resources“ rather than that of protecting the Arctic. It therefore made me question if sustainability has become a fake branding of an environmentally just future with unjustified means of an actual follow-through.

It is easy to promise a sustainable future for the Arctic by promising green energy, but the impression I got was that there was more focus on how the new „sustainable“ energy resources can enhance production. There was little, if any at all, talk about the need to heavily reduce consumption which would be a much more effective alternative to sustainable or green consumption possibilities. It was scary to listen to investors and their „business as usual“ ideology showing their interest in the Arctic, especially Greenland, as a modern goldmine for the over-exploiting economy.

Sustainability is a positive word. At the Arctic Circle there was clear expression of a hope of a sustainable future which of course is an immensely positive development. However, we must not only talk the talk but also walk the walk and make sure that those promising us a sustainable future are not hiding behind empty words at these critical times.